

[GENERIC PRONOUN] CREATES:
ANARCHISM, AUTHORSHIP, EXPERIMENT

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Abstract

First and foremost, my work develops a postanarchist literary theory that repositions the reading and writing of experimental texts as activist practice. Following the most recent trends in anarchist theory and political philosophy, postanarchist literary theory merges the primary concerns of classical anarchism with shifts in the conceptions of power and the State born out of postmodern and poststructural theory. Focusing specifically on the ways that the experimental text complicates the traditional relationship between author and reader, my project emphasizes how these experimental texts make manifest the role of language in a radical conception of *the common*. The concept of language as a part of the common is one shared, implicitly, by all the poets in my project, in some form or another, and to account for both the aesthetic and political anarchism of their experimental approach to authorship and readership, my dissertation takes on an experimental form. As both an insurrectionary tactic and a means of navigating the potential limitations of a more traditional print-based dissertation form, my project was first produced as a series of short single-author chapters linked through hypertext, and these were distributed via an open-access blog which invited reader contribution via interventionary comments.

Ultimately, my project sees a theory of alternative and experimentation in action in experimental poetic texts that are either implicitly or explicitly concerned with an anarchist activist practice on the level of the disruption of the author-function. We can see the intersection of postanarchism and poetry in the way John Cage reappropriates source texts in “62 Mesostics re Merce Cunningham” (1973), or the way Jackson Mac Low writes to and rewrites Gertrude Stein in *The Stein Poems* (2003): both authors seek to defamiliarize language for anarchic ethical ends. This intersection is represented differently in Denise Levertov’s call for readerly responsibility in *The Jacob’s Ladder* (1961), or in Robert Duncan’s call for readerly community

in his *Passages* sequence (in *Bending the Bow* [1968] and *Ground Work* [1984,1987]). It becomes radically feminist in the experiments with authorship seen in the revisionist appropriations of Susan Howe (*Bibliography of the King's Book, or, Eikon Basilike*, 1993), the indeterminacy of Erin Mouré (*Pillage Laud*, 1999), the racialized Language work of Harryette Mullen (*Sleeping with the Dictionary*, 2002), and communal politics of Juliana Spahr (*Response*, 2000). Working to establish a nascent but important postanarchist literary theory, this project reads and writes through each of these texts to show that postanarchism can and should be used as a literary theory that works to make the acts of reading, writing, and thinking about experimental texts part of an anarchist activist practice. While I have selected texts that explicitly challenge the authorial role and its concomitant political problems, it is my hope that my project brings to light the availability and importance of postanarchism as a theory of *reading*, and thus, of reading all literary texts.

Ultimately, this project argues that these authors or individual texts themselves are less important to my project than the way that my readings (rather than interpretations) of them help to illuminate the shortcomings of a critical literary theory that, as of yet, has not and cannot account for the changing face of popular resistance movements (anarchist or otherwise). For this reason, while I have, for the most part, selected texts that actively seek to disrupt the conventions of authorship and authorial intention, I have also chosen to examine both poets who are explicitly anarchist (Cage, Mac Low, Duncan, and to an extent Howe) alongside political authors who are not anarchist (Levertov, Spahr, Mullen). It is my hope that this selection of authors exposes both the necessity and the limitless possibilities of postanarchism as a literary theory.

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“I’m sitting in a coffee shop while I’m typing this and I know this is NOT the common.”
- Sean Braune

“The common speaks: a conversation unfolds...”
- Cesare Casarino, *In Praise of the Common*

What is Postanarchism? A Brief Introduction

Despite recent interest in incorporating political philosophies into literary studies, one of the most interesting (and potentially most useful) contemporary political philosophies, postanarchism, has yet to been given adequate attention as a literary theory. Yet elements of postanarchism are not only readily available as literary theories, they also allow incorporation of political activism with criticism. The intersections between postanarchism and literary studies have been woefully ignored, and this is probably most evident in the 2011 publication of *Post-Anarchism: A Reader*, edited by Süreyya Evren and Duane Rousselle. The text draws a clear link between poststructuralism and anarchism, and between anarchist philosophy and activism, but it seemingly ignores the potentials of postanarchism as a literary theory that would incorporate literary cultural production into activist practice. As literary studies works to become more practical, and more in line with activist movements of all kinds, it would seem that postanarchism, in its desire to reframe and rethink our ontological and epistemological practices within and outside of the academy, would be an appropriate and effective addition to literary studies on the whole.

The postanarchism proposed in Evren and Rousselle’s reader, articulated explicitly in the editors’ introduction, clearly situates postanarchism as an activist practice, emphasizing that its fundamental ideas would be defined not simply as philosophies, but rather as “consequence[s] of actual activist experiences” (3). Poststructuralism invigorates classical anarchism with a rhizomatic, new activism (5), creating a new current in radical politics (15). Evren and

Rousselle's collection is most important because it gives a *name* (that is, it collects various essays under this name) and a clear set of *ideals* to postanarchism proper. Additionally, it puts at the centre of its philosophy and activism the essential mutability of human nature and subjectivity, maintaining that classical anarchism (despite contemporary criticism of its utopian humanism) was actually always convinced of this mutability (13). While I will discuss this notion further in the theorizations of anarchism and postanarchism that follow, it is clear that Evren and Rousselle's text is both a revaluation and a reclamation of classical anarchism that seeks to bring anarchism's classical texts into contemporary relevance.

Given classical anarchism's standing as a political philosophy, and one primarily concerned with government and resistance, it may be surprising for some readers to learn that classical anarchism has actually long been concerned with artistic practice. There has been a long-standing and close relationship between anarchist thought and poetry, especially experimental or avant-garde poetry. One need only to look at the popularity of Herbert Read's *Anarchy & Order; Poetry & Anarchism* (1938), or recall André Breton's oft-quoted adage, "An anarchist world ... a surrealist world: they are the same," to confirm this. As I will discuss towards the end of this introduction, some recent anarchist philosophers and activists (Jesse Cohn at the forefront) have done substantial work in connecting a renewed interest in anarchism with the seemingly constant popularity of the avant-garde. But, as Evren and Rousselle's reader suggests throughout, classical anarchism, despite its suggestions of the mutability of human nature, does not adequately account for shifting conceptions of power and the self, and thus cannot keep pace with the changing face of anarchist activism.

My dissertation endeavours to help anarchist philosophies catch up to this changing activism, working to examine, and in some cases, to define, postanarchism as a theory of

activism that can and will incorporate the processes of reading and writing experimental poetry into the realm of activist practice. That is, as poststructuralism teaches us, and as I extrapolate in the pages that follow, the new conceptions of power, subjectivity, and authorship that poststructuralist philosophers have elucidated require that we experiment with new forms of “resistance” practices. And if we understand that diffuse power functions most effectively at the level of ontology and epistemology (an argument made persistently by Foucault and his contemporaries), then surely the cultural artefact, and especially the literary artefact, must come into play as an element of activist practice. To be sure, art has historically played a role in anti-authoritarian struggles internationally, but postanarchism forces us to make a distinction between *political art* and *art as politic*; in the latter, the very form (and not simply the content) of the artefact and the process of its production is a political experiment. My project will privilege the formally experimental poem as the subject of postanarchist literary reading practices.

In order to expand on this theorization I should first explain that, throughout my project, I define the experiment (as a poetic form) as distinct from the avant-garde. While I will work towards a positive definition of the experiment later in the section entitled “Anarchism and the Experiment: What is an experimental poem?” it is important that I, in setting the textual parameters of my work, meditate briefly on existing theories of the avant-garde. The genre of avant-garde literature has been theorized and studied extensively, perhaps most famously in Renato Poggioli’s *Teoria dell’arte d’avanguardia* (*Theory of the Avant Garde*, 1962), and later in Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984). Poggioli’s work emphasizes the ways in which the avant-garde, as an expression of authorial and audience alienation from society, positions itself as anti-traditional, noting that the “avant-garde looks and works like a culture of negation” (107). For Poggioli, this negation is especially focused on notions of individual

production and artistic or authorial control over the artistic product as cultural artefact. Bürger develops this argument further, arguing that the avant-garde's interest in the negation of authorial autonomy is directly correlated with a negation of audience individuality, an attack against bourgeois ideations of aesthetics and art. He writes, "[t]he avant-garde not only negates the category of individual production but also that of individual *reception*" (53, *emph.* Bürger's). While I will work to complicate the use of the term avant-garde later in this introduction, this preoccupation in theories of the avant-garde with the disruption of creative autonomy is, I argue, the most important intersection of postanarchism and experimental poetics. As I will work to demonstrate throughout this project, the primary concern of the experimental text is to move beyond the discourse of disavowal that Poggioli and Bürger recognize at the centre of the avant-garde, and to embrace alternative rather than negation and experiment rather than resistance. More directly, the experimental text embraces a multiplicitous strategy of resistance based on alternatives rather than the binarism of the avant-garde practice of resistance through negation.

Ultimately, my project sees this theory of alternative and experimentation in action in experimental poetic texts that are either implicitly or explicitly concerned with an anarchist activist practice on the level of the disruption of the author-function. We can see the intersection of postanarchism and poetry in the way John Cage reappropriates source texts in "62 Mesostics re Merce Cunningham" (1973), or the way Jackson Mac Low writes to and rewrites Gertrude Stein in *The Stein Poems* (2003): both authors seek to defamiliarize language for anarchic ethical ends. This intersection is represented differently in Denise Levertov's call for reader responsibility in *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961), or in Robert Duncan's call for reader community in his *Passages* sequence (in *Bending the Bow* [1968] and *Ground Work* [1984,1987]). The same intersection becomes radically feminist in the experiments with authorship seen in the revisionist

appropriations of Susan Howe (*Bibliography of the King's Book, or, Eikon Basilike*, 1993), the indeterminacy of Erin Mouré (*Pillage Laud*, 1999), the racialized LANGUAGE work of Harryette Mullen (*Sleeping with the Dictionary*, 2002), and communal politics of Juliana Spahr (*Response*, 2000). In working to establish a nascent postanarchist literary theory, this project reads and writes through each of these texts to show that postanarchism can and should be used as a literary theory that works, above all else, to make the acts of reading, writing, and thinking about experimental texts part of an anarchist activist practice.

While I have selected texts that explicitly challenge the authorial role and its concomitant political problems, it is my hope that my project brings to light the availability and importance of postanarchism as a theory of *reading*, and thus, of reading all literary texts. Ultimately, this project argues that these authors/individual texts themselves are less important to my project than the way that my readings (rather than interpretations) of them help to illuminate the shortcomings of a critical literary theory that, as of yet, has not and cannot account for the changing face of popular resistance movements (anarchist or otherwise). While I have, for the most part, selected texts that actively disrupt the conventions of authorship and authorial intent, I have also chosen to examine poets who are explicitly anarchist (Cage, Mac Low, Duncan, and, to an extent, Howe) as well as political authors who are not anarchist (Levertov, Spahr, Mullen). It is my hope that this selection of authors exposes both the necessity and the limitless possibilities of postanarchism as a literary theory.

What is Postanarchism?: Poststructuralism and Postmodernism

Aside from Hakim Bey, who coins the term in 1985 (and who I will discuss in more depth momentarily), arguably the most important writer on postanarchism is political philosopher Todd May, whose *The Political Philosophy of Poststructural Anarchism* (1994),

paved the way for later texts that sought the inherent anarchism of poststructural philosophy. May's text sees postanarchism as poststructural-anarchism, looking especially to the works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to examine how the implicit politics of these philosophers is necessarily anarchic. For May, the French poststructuralists altered the face of activist resistance by shifting the focus from a Marxist one-sided Statism, to a more effective and appropriate micropolitics (3). Postanarchism, then, incorporates aspects of poststructuralist philosophy into its activist practice to achieve two concomitant aims. As I will work through in the paragraphs that follow, May's postanarchism has two primary concerns: first, it rejects what May sees as the *a priori* humanism of classical anarchism, and to replace it with a positive definition of power; second, it works towards a rhizomatic resistance practice that uses diffuse power relations as not only something it opposes, but also an important element of its resistance tactic. For these two aims, May relies on Foucault's work for the former, and Deleuze and Guattari's for the latter.

May incorporates Foucauldian conceptions of power relations into classical anarchist thought. He begins by exposing how Foucault's ideas of power necessitate a revision of anarchist tactics, which typically reject all forms of power, arguing instead for aspirational systems based upon the avoidance of hierarchies. Instead, May posits that poststructuralist anarchism allows for the incorporation of power into its theories by maintaining that power is constraint, but not necessarily restraint (67). As Foucault asserts throughout his work, power emanates from innumerable points, is not exterior to relationships, comes "from below" as well as "from above," and is both intentional and nonsubjective (May 72). For an anarchist resistance movement this means two things. First and foremost, it dissolves the false dichotomy of the individual subject and governing structures that individualist anarchism praises; after all, as May

writes, “[p]ower does not merely suppress its objects; it creates them as well” (73). Second, it requires an immediate break from the humanism attributed to many classical anarchists.¹ That is, the primacy of a humanist, individual identity must be abandoned once we understand that the political subject is produced at the same time, and in the same manner, as those larger governing structures that anarchism critiques. In this way, Foucault’s assertions about power and the State form the base of May’s poststructuralist anarchism and set the tone for his activist politics.

May argues, then, that a poststructuralist activist practice is, at its core, an anarchist critique of representation (98). This critique of representation is linked, he maintains, to the deleuzoguattarian concept of “overcoding” (105). Deleuze and Guattari define overcoding as a series of “phenomena of centering, unification, totalization, integration, hierarchization, and finalization” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 41). These phenomena are processes that seek to stratify and normalize subjects, and the best way to resist these processes is to “decode,” or to put these processes in flux. For Deleuze and Guattari, this is achieved through a deterritorialization that produces the “nomad” figure, which May argues is inherently anti-Statist (*Political Philosophy* 104-5). May also notes that “[t]he state is not the only operator of overcoding, but it is the operator that makes it stick” (107). Thus, a purely anti-Statist, or classical anarchist, resistance would be largely ineffectual because it does not account for those elements of power that exist external to and *a priori* of the State. Instead, May looks again to Deleuze, who advocates a tactic of “experimentation” rather than resistance (112). This, along with its rejection of humanism, marks poststructuralist anarchism’s major break with classical anarchist thought. Poststructuralist anarchism values experimentation over resistance because, as May asserts, “[e]xperimentation,

¹ This humanism is perhaps most evident in anarcho-syndicalists following in the tradition of Max Stirner, or the staunch individualism of William Godwin, and much later, Emma Goldman. It is also clearly evident in the deference to human nature of anarchists like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. But, elements of a primal humanism are still present even in the most communal anarchism, such as the anarcho-communism proposed by Peter Kropotkin.

unlike transgression, seeks positive alternatives rather than revolt” (114). The revolutionary, anti-Statist nature of classical anarchism seeks this “transgression,” which can neither account for nor combat these processes of overcoding. In understanding power, and thus political struggle, as unidimensional (as transgression rather than experimentation), classical anarchism ignores those other “operators” of overcoding that proliferate in the power structures that anarchism should, and *must*, disturb. In literature, poststructuralist experimentation places an emphasis on subjugated discourses (116), which Deleuze and Guattari refer to as minor literature. It also reorients the role of the intellectual, making philosophical, theoretical, cultural, and artistic practice an active engagement rather than a passive analysis of activism (117). That is, “[t]heory does not exist outside of practice; it, too, is a practice” (97). Here May’s poststructuralist anarchism prioritizes artistic, and especially poetic, practice, as a part of activism rather than simply a way to talk about political engagement. It thus lends itself especially well to studies of radically experimental poetry. Most importantly, it makes my own project (its theorizations, its criticism, its experimentation) an active practice, and, in some ways, an activist practice.

What is Postanarchism?: Theorizing Anarchism

At this juncture, I should make a brief note about the explicitly political, activist nature of these theoretical texts, and of the political philosophy behind them. While I maintain that these texts are valuable to literary study (and invaluable to the creation of a postanarchist literary theory), I do not want these literary elements to detract or distract from the inherent activism of anarchism and postanarchism. As such, I would like to note that Evren and Rousselle’s aforementioned reader is preceded by Saul Newman’s *The Politics of Postanarchism* (2010), a less comprehensive but no less important treatise on postanarchism, which argues vehemently for the merger of classical anarchism and poststructuralism as a way to reinvigorate new

anarchist activist practices.² While Newman maintains that postanarchism is a response to the postmodern condition (140), marked by a skepticism of metanarratives, an abandonment of essential identities, and a new view of discourse and constitutive power (à la Foucault) (141), he tends to move these philosophical ideals into an activist practice. Arguing that the political is the “constitutive space *between* society and the state” (169, *emph. Newman’s*), Newman uses postanarchism to contest borders and border control (172), to advocate non-authoritarian forms of political organisation (177), and to develop a productive disjuncture between politics and ethics (139). For Newman, postanarchism is, at its core, not “tactical” (169)—that is, not thought before action—but rather, a celebration of heretical (anti)politics (180).

Alongside Newman, who problematizes my work by enforcing the practical activist nature of postanarchism, I also place David Graeber, a prominent radical author and activist whose “Anarchism, Academia, and the Avant-garde” (in Routledge’s *Contemporary Anarchist Studies*, 2009), should be included in every subsequent anarchist-academic work because it poses the important (though ultimately unanswerable) question: what would an anarchist academic *do?* (107). Graeber argues here that the anarchist academic occupies a precarious position because these two terms are often understood to be incommensurate; anarchists and academics value entirely different and often contradictory ideals³ (104). Nonetheless, Graeber positions the

² Evren and Rousselle make a distinction between Todd May’s work and Saul Newman’s work by arguing that while May uses anarchism to make poststructuralism more effective, Newman uses poststructuralism to make anarchism better (10), implying that in this dynamic May is the philosopher, Newman the pragmatist.

³ For example, the anarchist seeks to destabilize hierarchy and hegemony, and what could be more hierarchical than the academy and its valuation of tenure? Indeed, the very system of the academy is based on a hierarchy of presidents, deans, assistant deans, full professors, associate professors, assistant professors, sessional or adjunct instructors, graduate students, and support staff of various types. I will admit that classical anarchism does not object to or reject the authority or expertise denoted by specialization; after all, in *God and the State*, Mikhail Bakunin famously argues, “Does it follow that I reject all authority? Perish the thought. In the matter of boots, I defer to the authority of the bootmaker; concerning houses, canals, or railroads, I consult the architect or the engineer. ... But I allow neither the bootmaker nor the architect ... to impose his authority on me” (229). But, the academy, in its

anarchist intellectual as a sort of litmus test, “provid[ing] a potential role for the radical, non-vanguardist intellectual” (111). His assertion that the anarchist intellectual must be anti-vanguardist is especially relevant for my work and should immediately recall Deleuze and Guattari’s desire for experimentation over transgression. Rejecting the vanguardism of avant-garde literary and artistic movements such as dadaism and futurism (and, in one fell swoop also dismissing the anarchism often attributed to them), Graeber argues that the anarchist intellectual must be interested in exploring alternatives, not setting a vanguard (109). His assertion here breaks with classical anarchism, making his anti-vanguardism decidedly postanarchist. Classical anarchism, despite its vocal denigration of vanguardist ideals, often implicitly believed in vanguardism to a degree.⁴ The anarchist academic’s task is difficult, but not doomed *ab ovo*. “Untwining social theory from vanguardist habits might seem a particularly difficult task,” Graeber writes, “because historically modern social theory and the idea of the vanguard were born more or less together” (108). Instead, the role of the anarchist academic is to develop manners of reading, writing, and understanding, not as a “vanguard leading the way to a future society,” but rather as a way of “exploring new and less alienated modes of life” (109). In this project, I argue that through its defamiliarization the formally experimental poem allows us one way of doing just this, and that it is indeed possible to work as an academic studying avant-garde literature without necessarily falling victim to a vanguardism oneself.

hierarchical nature and its concomitant privileging of certain voices, seeks explicitly to impose its hegemonic authority on others.

⁴ As evidence of this anarchist vanguardism, consider the classical anarchists’ interest in *propagande par le fait* (propaganda by/of the deed), the concept popularized by French anarchist Paul Brousse, and later taken up by many activist circles, anarchist and otherwise, that privileged unique and spectacular resistance tactics, both violent and non-violent, as a means of disseminating political statements.

What is Postanarchism?: Hakim Bey and “Poetic Terrorism”

In 1985, when Bey published *The Temporary Autonomous Zone; Ontological Anarchy; Poetic Terrorism*, he did so, at least in part, out of frustration with an anarchist-activist movement that had stalled, suffering from the aforementioned unidimensional and unidirectional approach that failed to account for a society in which we must understand power as diffuse and pervasive. Instead, he proposes *postanarchism* (61), an anarchism that is, not oedipal (to borrow a deleuzoguattarian term, as Bey is wont to do), but rather, band-like (95), a carnivalesque festival (96), and psychically nomadic (97). Bey’s postanarchism would be “a perfect tactic for an era in which the State is omnipresent and all-powerful and yet simultaneously riddled with cracks and vacancies” (93). Bey’s *postanarchism* is not a temporal term, not an “after anarchism” that picks up where a failed movement leaves off, but an anarchism that always contains within it the lessons learned from poststructuralist conceptions of power and the State, as well as its revolutionary potentials. What differentiates Bey’s postanarchism most from the anarchism that preceded it is its prioritisation of art, and often poetry specifically, as a revolutionary activist practice. Lamenting the fact that art and literature are no longer regarded as threats to an authoritarian regime, Bey insists that poetry become more radical (although he does not specify *how*), and that other facets of resistance movements take on the revolutionary potentials of poetic language. He writes: “If rulers refuse to consider poems as crimes, then someone must commit crimes that serve the function of poetry, or texts that possess the resonance of terrorism” (*TAZ* 27). And yet, while this reads as a resounding advocacy of (political, corporeal) radical poetics, Bey never fully develops this concept. Instead, his notion of “poems as crimes” remains unclear. Even his own poetry leaves this poetics underdeveloped and unclear. In it, he maintains the

mysticism, the politics, and the viscera of his political writing—see, for example, his *Opium Dens I Have Known* (2009)—but because so much of his creative work recalls or even works within the confines of lyrical structure,⁵ it is difficult to see where or how these poems engage with the “criminal” potentials of language. Bey thus provides us with a more effective and tantalizing poetic theory than he does a poetic practice. This is not to say that his postanarchist poetry is ineffective or irredeemable, but rather that Bey’s political writing can, and should, be taken further as an experimental poetics, as well as a practical reading philosophy. My project is an attempt to do precisely that. Looking to the postanarchism first proposed by Bey, I interrogate the poetic theory latent in Bey’s work, and develop this into a postanarchist literary theory that shows us not only how to create texts that are crimes, texts that defamiliarize the modes of poetic production, but also how to make the reading and writing of these poems ontological activism.

Central to the poetic theory Bey proposes is his concept of Poetic Terrorism, an activist practice that occurs at the site of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (hereafter referred to as the TAZ). The TAZ is a philosophical thought experiment that can be, should be, and *is often* produced literally. Varying constantly in longevity, type, and size, TAZs range from an individual moment of refusal to the widespread “Occupy” movements popularized in 2012. Bey goes to great lengths to avoid or resist defining the TAZ, but he does note that it is a moment when artistic and activist practices convene in an “uprising that doesn’t engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then

⁵ I admit that there can be experimental potentials of the lyric. Canadian poet bpNichol in *The Martyrology* is a good contemporary example. Additionally, the modernists (among them, of course, Eliot, Pound, and Williams) called for, in a gross oversimplification, the experimentalization of the lyric. Indeed, attempts to radicalize the lyric have been, and continue to be, numerous and wildly popular. That said, this project positions the lyric poem, with its irrepressible contemporary popularity, its rich canonical history, and its predominant interest in a unified, singular writing subject supposedly in control of his/her use of language, in opposition to the radical, experimental poem purely in terms of form. The primary elements of experimental form are elusive but necessarily work against the primary elements of the lyric.

dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen” (*TAZ* 92). Similarly, Bey refuses to define Poetic Terrorism in a prescriptive fashion. Instead, he does so indirectly through examples, such as:

Pick someone at random & convince them they’re the heir to an enormous, useless & amazing fortune—say 5000 square miles of Antarctica. ... Later they will come to realize that for a few moments they believed in something extraordinary, & will perhaps be driven as a result to seek out some more intense mode of existence. (*TAZ* 14)

While still obscure and eccentric, this definition by example reveals the hallmark of Poetic Terrorism:⁶ it attempts to defamiliarize, but by way of moving the quotidian into the extraordinary, and, in this example especially, by calling into question the taken-for-granted principles of capitalism and Statism. That is, the sudden acquisition of Antarctic territory, for example, brings to the fore assumptions of ownership as economic, as state-sanctioned, and as socially-recognized. Bey’s Poetic Terrorism here begs the question: how does government, in its many forms, limit our ability to believe in and embrace the “extraordinary”? Thus, Poetic Terrorism infringes on the laws of State and logic, patriarchy and normativity, grammar and

⁶ Comment by Sean Braune (18/11/13): “I have always thought of anarchism as a politically creative endeavour and I like that Bey explicitly relates his ‘postanarchism’ to art. Good question regarding ‘Poetic Terrorism’ and the ways in which poetry can be ‘criminal.’ Criminal to what? Hegemony? Grammar? Can the lyric poem become ‘criminal’ if it describes or celebrates different instances of life—instances that are seen as outside of hegemonic, social, or cultural norms? If Bey does this ... then his associations with pedophilic subcultures is worrisome. I like to think of postanarchist criticism or invention as being a practice that disrupts ‘meaning’ systems.”

Response (18/11/13): “Yeah, Sean. We do need to talk about the pedophilia stuff. I’ve obviously avoided it as best I could, but you are absolutely right that the *TAZ* does leave us open to the potentials of some really dangerous activity. My response can only be that the *TAZ* can only function where there is mutual respect and public trust, and considering the very interesting political discussions these days about clear definitions of consent (a foundational aspect of respect and trust in the common), I fail to see how Bey could justify these problematic sexual preferences. As this article (<http://libcom.org/library/paedophilia-and-american-anarchism-the-other-side-of-hakim-bey>) suggests, Bey’s apparent pedophilia implies that his conception of the *TAZ* is more opportunist than it is communal, and that is regrettable. But, if we’re de-chiefting, as you mentioned in another comment, then I can just as well discard his sexuality and take his philosophy, sufficiently doctored to avoid it being used to justify oppression. On the criminal lyric—you are more hopeful about that than I am. Perhaps I have lost hope in the lyric at large. But, perhaps there can be terrorist lyrics out there.”

propriety. These regulating and codifying effects produce, as poststructuralism insists, the political subject, and Poetic Terrorism works to liberate the individual from these effects. Bey's concept of Poetic Terrorism prioritises the poetry of the deed⁷ (that is, the activist practice of disseminating art and beautiful artefact), but my project focuses specifically on how this concept of Poetic Terrorism helps us to understand the experimental and radical poetics of some contemporary poetry at the site of language itself, and to make them activist.

Appendixⁿ: A Note on "Terrorism"

I realise that in 2013 in North America I write about terrorism in a vastly different political climate than the one in which Bey wrote in 1985. I am also acutely aware that my use of the term is not without political motivation or desire for controversy. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States especially—but also to some extent the better part of the Western world—adopted and adapted the use of the term “terrorism” to demonize the racial Other and to justify multifarious abuses of civil liberties. Importantly, this adaptation has abstracted terrorism to the point where it no longer requires a specific act or a specific enemy, producing a vague, non-localizable threat that effectively produces fear and complicity in political subjects. The American Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) publishes an *Annual Report on Terrorism* that, in its annuality, both restates and persistently alters its definition of terrorism. These definitions are always taken from the official mandates of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). The publication and republication of this “Annual Report” implies that this so-called terrorism is omnipresent in contemporary society, and that there will necessarily be a need for subsequent reports, implicitly legitimizing the FBI's reports, and the NCTC's very presence, in a distinctly Foucauldian turn. The subtle changes in this definition

⁷ Bey uses the phrasing “poetry of the deed” in contradistinction from Paul Brousse's “propaganda by/of the deed” to refuse the vanguardism and prescription attributed to the latter.

year-to-year could be the subject of this entire introduction. Instead, I hazard only this brief note on the term to account for, and justify, my use of “terrorism” as a term for experimental resistance. In the FBI *Annual Report on Terrorism* of 2005, they define terrorism specifically as “the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.” But, in 2011, the FBI reports the NCTC’s definition as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.” This latter definition, in its maintenance of the stress on political motivation alongside its shift of focus onto the identity of the perpetrator—a delegitimised cause that is subnational or clandestine, as opposed to the recognised authority of the State—allows the NCTC and the FBI to classify and condemn activist organisations (even those operating within the US) as terrorists. In this way, the term “terrorism” is persistently used to pre-emptively delegitimize and/or criminalize dissenting voices in the US, and, in turn, the rest of the Western world.

While this project neither condemns nor condones the actions of any organisation classified as “terrorist” under US law, I maintain that the term itself is important to, and helps to explain, the activist nature of reading and writing experimental texts. While the only “violence” committed in the texts studied here is that of radical poetic practice against the normative, organising structures of language, the anti-Statist position at the core of any anarchist practice would be classified, under these definitions, as terrorist. This violence against language itself is one I can, without hesitation, endorse, and that I can, somewhat reservedly, classify as a Poetic Terrorism against the State(s) of Language, Literature, and the Lyric. As Lyotard writes, breaking from the comfort of preconceptions is a kind of violence, a suffering; “The unthought

hurts because we're comfortable in what's already thought. And thinking, which is accepting this discomfort, is also, to put it bluntly, an attempt to have done with it" (*Inhuman* 20). And so, trite as it may read, the experimental writer is a kind of guerrilla poet, and her/his terrorism is instigating the suffering of thinking the unthought.⁸

Anarchism and the Experiment: What is an experimental poem?

It is important at this juncture to define the parameters of the experimental poem for my work. I have opted for the term "experimental"⁹ over the term "avant-garde"¹⁰ for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the military connotation of the latter. I also employ Graeber's skepticism of vanguardism, which is also a poststructuralist concern.¹¹ For the most part, the texts I read in this project share not only an anti-traditional poetics, but a poetics that resists the vanguardism that marks many of the movements of the literary avant-garde outlined above.

These texts avoid vanguardism's hierarchical nature in favour of a more egalitarian relationship between the reader and the writer—and between texts themselves—by complicating the role of

⁸ Comment by Caitlin O'Kelly (15/6/13): "I am confused with how an anarchist would be considered a terrorist if they have not committed a 'violent' act for the purpose of furthering their cause. Are you saying that even their words could be considered a violent act under that definition of terrorism? Even if they are not causing any physical harm to themselves or others?"

Response (15/6/13): "Good question. What this means, first of all, is that we adequately define what we mean by 'violence.' It's a tough concept to define. What we can say is that the NCTC and the FBI consider violence done to bodies AS WELL AS to property enough to level terrorism charges. This violence can also be mental/emotional as well as physical. This is where Lyotard's work factors in. If causing suffering is violent (is it?), then forcing someone to think the unthought, or to adopt a new critical mind-set, is a violent act. And here we can say that the anarchist academic commits a terrorism of sorts, and so does the experimental poet."

⁹ I define the experimental, first and foremost, as a matter of formal innovation. In this way, the experimental text is one that does not discount or ignore innovation in terms of content, but that necessarily ties innovative content to the creation of new, alternative forms of expression.

¹⁰ The terms themselves are clearly etymologically linked. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes, "vanguard" is "avant-garde"'s contemporary aphetic.

¹¹ Poststructuralism has long been concerned with critiquing the vanguardist nature of resistance or oppositional movements. See, for example, Paul Bové's foreword to Deleuze's *Foucault*: "Deleuze emphasises that Foucault's sense of the diffusion of power is a challenge not only to Statist theories but also to theories of the oppositional or vanguard party" (xxix).

the author (through, for example, chance or indeterminate operations, “plagiarism” or copying, direct or collaborative engagement with the reader, etc.) and demonstrating an interest in the commonality of language. In light of this, any definition of the experiment is nebulous, a compendium of ideas that forms a collaborative series of suggestions rather than a prescriptive map of what the experimental poem *should be*. I include these criteria only to gesture toward a theory of the poetic experiment.

1. *Artifice*: The experimental text is concerned with exposing and/or foregrounding artifice, as Charles Bernstein writes in “Artifice of Absorption” (*A Poetics*, 1992). Bernstein argues here that a poem’s meaning is located in a “complex” (9), wherein the artifice opposes the realism and mimesis often attributed to conventional texts (and especially to the lyrical poem). Artifice, which also includes “nonsemantic” effects (11), is necessarily part of a poem’s “meaning.” This is to say that a poem’s form is *meaningful* in and of itself, rather than simply contributing to an overall meaning, or enforcing the meaning of the poem’s content (10). Radically experimental form in poetry threatens to negate (or complicate) semantic meaning in the same way that the reverse can be true for traditional verse (15).
2. *Open*: The experimental text is never exhausted or exhaustive, and its production is a constant revisionary practice. As made famous in Lyn Hejinian’s “The Rejection of Closure” (1985), the experimental text refuses the “smug pretension of universality and its tendency to cast the poet as guardian to Truth” (2). Closed texts, for Hejinian, maintain a stratified position for text and author, enforcing a single interpretation, and shutting out their readers from the process of their production. An experimental text resists closure and leaves itself open to multiple readings because of gaps in the text left

to be filled by the reader. This notion of the closed text is also famously critiqued as fallacy by Roland Barthes, as I will discuss shortly.

3. *Chance*: The experimental author leaves him/herself open to the intervening forces of chance, indeterminacy, improvisation, or spontaneity. This includes collaborative inclusion of the reader or other participants, as well as uncreative or Oulipian modes of writing that leave the writing process (in part or whole) up to external procedures. This element recalls the scientific meaning of the term “experiment,” wherein the parameters of the project are set, but the role of the initiator is severely limited regarding the final result.¹² Jackson Mac Low argues that leaving oneself open to chance in the production of experimental texts is a necessarily anarchic political decision; it reproduces an anarchic “state of society wherein there is no frozen power structure, where all persons may make significant initiatory choices in regard to matters affecting their own lives” (“Statement” 384). In other words, the initiator of these procedures anarchically refuses authoritative control over the production of his/her poem, and thus relinquishes power over the final product.
4. *Politic*: The experimental text is political. What Bernstein, Hejinian, and Mac Low all suggest in their aforementioned manifestos is that formal manipulation in poetry is a political (anti-traditional, anti-authoritarian) act that seeks to disturb the organizing and thus limiting principles of overcoding inherent in language. This is made most apparent in John Cage’s frequent references “to N[orman] O. Brown’s remark that syntax is the arrangement of the army” and Cage’s subsequent “devot[ion] to nonsyntactical

¹² It should be noted that, despite indeterminacy’s indebtedness to the scientific meanings of “experiment,” its end-goal is markedly different. The scientific experiment seeks category, system, hierarchy, and Truth (bolstered by juridical, medical, logical, and scientific discourses); the experimental poem seeks to disrupt these methods of overcoding.

‘demilitarized’ language” (*Writing Through Finnegans Wake* 1). For Cage, the experimental poem is a way out of this militarization, a way not to resist, but to refuse; as he suggests in *Silence*, we need a new language in order to have new ideas (203).

I should also add that, in the vein of Bey’s definitions of the TAZ, the experiment must also be defined by what it *does not* do. The only concern here is that the experimental text does not reify, rely on, or relish the individual as author. This contradicts John Ashbery’s definition of the experimental avant-garde in his 1968 Yale lecture, “The Invisible Avant-Garde.” Here, Ashbery argues that the very existence of his lecture proves that the avant-garde has become “stratified” (394), insisting that the primacy of anti-traditionalism in the avant-garde has created another tradition that eventually subsumes the individual prowess of the author. In the end, he tellingly laments: “has tradition finally managed to absorb the individual talent?” (397). Recalling Eliot’s famous treatise on the subject, Ashbery maintains that the *real* avant-garde is the individual; it is not a school, genre, or group, but rather a personal refusal.¹³ I maintain that while Ashbery’s privileging of the individual, monadic author is a marker of the avant-garde, it is also antithetical to experiment, which embraces the influence of tradition, the mutability of the writing subject, and the collaborative nature of the processes of reading and writing.¹⁴

Anarchism and the Experiment: Who is the author?

Because I have privileged authorship (and its destabilization) as the most important aspect of the experimental poetic text, I should here spend some time discussing *what*

¹³ While I refute Ashbery’s notion here, I do want to make note of the fact that Ashbery holds this very true for his own work, and this is the primary reason why his poetry has proven so difficult to classify in terms of experimental school/genre.

¹⁴ It is important to note that, at some point in the scholarship surrounding them, each of the authors studied in this project have, in some cases mistakenly, been described as a part of the avant-garde. While I will expand on these distinction on a text-by-text basis, I should now note that ascribing an author a position in the literary vanguard is a political choice that runs counter to the explicitly anti-vanguardist stance of postanarchism as a reading practice.

experimental authorship entails, and how its problematizing of traditional authorship is a politically-charged activism. As with any contemporary discussion of shifting perspectives of authorship, this discussion begins with the poststructuralist meditations on the Author, the two central texts of which are Foucault's "What Is an Author?" (1969, republished in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 1977) and Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1967, republished in *Image – Music – Text*, 1977). Foucault's essay stands in stark contrast to Ashbery's Yale musings on the avant-garde, as Foucault begins with the assertion that the author him/herself is not an individual, but rather a discursive practice (114). Rather than view the writer as the "sovereignty of the author" (126), an authoritarian figure that, recalling the Hejiniian quotation above, closes the text and stands as the arbiter of literary Truth, Foucault proposes an *author-function* that situates text and author in a complex of discursive practices that eliminates the notion of *correct* reading practices in favour of a reader-based manner of reading.

Barthes makes this same point, arguing famously that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (*Image – Music – Text* 148). He notes that this shift in the power dynamic of author and reader is long overdue, arguing that "classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature" (148). While I argue here that one element of a postanarchist literary theory is to make good on Barthes's command, I do not mean to suggest that this shift is not already an important element of contemporary literary criticism in its various forms. What I do want to stress is the manner in which other contemporary literary theories—among them reader response, but also historical materialism and its ilk—have recognized the importance of the reader insofar as s/he receives and makes sense of the text in question. Postanarchism hears Foucault's assertion, and understands Barthes' call-to-arms, as a merger of author and reader in the form of an author-

function that is in constant engagement with a real or imagined audience, which is to say that postanarchism argues for an even *more* central and active role for the reader in the creation of textual meaning, and, indeed, in the production of the text itself. If, as Barthes argues, removing the “Author” makes attempts to “decipher” a given text futile because the Author necessarily limits interpretation (147), postanarchism’s collapsing of the Author proper opens indefinite readings, and indefinite readers, and is thus especially well-suited as a theoretical framework for reading experimental, indeterminate, and (especially) semantically nonsensical texts.¹⁵

A postanarchist literary theory, then, takes into its framework Foucault’s discussions of the author-function in “What Is an Author?” to understand the relationship between literal writer and the author-function s/he takes on. To begin, the Author is an appropriation that possesses the text (in name as well as legally in the form of intellectual property) (124).¹⁶ Moreover, the author-function—in each individual case, as well as conceptually—is neither universal nor constant, and, instead, functions as a result of various discursive practices determined sociohistorically, and predicated on the production of power-knowledge (126). That is, as Foucault writes, the author-function “is not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual. It results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call author” (127). As such, the author-function is certainly not an actual individual, but rather the complex interplay of author/writer/narrator (130), and, in light of postanarchism’s interest in the reader, we can now append him/her to that list. This inclusion of

¹⁵ I acknowledge here, and will repeatedly acknowledge throughout my project, my own role as critic in the limitation of readers/readings. This limitation is, I will concede, a necessary evil of the English Department.

¹⁶ Foucault notes that this primary element is historically determined, writing: “It is important to notice ... that its status as property is historically secondary to the penal code controlling its appropriation. Speeches and books were assigned real authors, other than mythical or important religious figures, only when the author became subject to punishment and to the extent that his [sic] discourse was considered transgressive” (*Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* 124).

the reader as a substantial and central element of the author-function demands a radical re-envisioning of the entire author-function. In the experimental poem, where issues of author/writer/narrator are blurred, often to the point where the boundaries of these entities are unintelligible, Barthes's and Foucault's assertions are problematized, and yet also never more valuable because they have opened the door to the reader's inclusion in the active production of textual meaning. This does, however, suggest that new understandings of reading processes (processes of reading text *and* reading author) are necessary in order to develop new and effective ways of readings these experimental texts.

Additionally, it is worth noting that Barthes's conceptions of "readerly" and "writerly" texts also signal his frustrations with closed and conventional reading practices. In his ideation, the "readerly" text is one that does not provoke the reader to produce his/her own meanings within the text. Alongside his argument that the Author necessarily limits the meanings of a text, Barthes argues that the "readerly text" employs the text and its tradition "like a cupboard where meanings are shelved, stacked, [and] safeguarded" (*S/Z* 200). Alternatively, for Barthes, the "writerly text," which in this project is represented *par excellence* by the formally experimental poem, is one that endeavours "to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text" (4). Ultimately, he argues that this is, or at the very least *should be* "the goal of literary work (of literature as *work*)" (4, *emph. mine*). In a project that seeks to reclaim reading as activist practice, this notion of "literature as *work*" is especially pertinent; the *work* here is not simply the hermeneutic interpretive function of the passive reader, but also necessarily the active, and thus activist, intervention of the reader in the process of textual production, thus destabilizing the hermeneutic process from the start. In essence, Barthes argues that the author-function's relationship to the text and its readers is the very site at which reading can (and

should) be made activist.

The issue of authorship in the experimental text has drawn a considerable amount of scholarly attention. The majority of scholarship on the experimental text since the seventies has focused on *how* the author enacts his/herself in the text at the expense of actual textual analysis. As a prime example of this, in 2010, Marjorie Perloff, perhaps the most famous name in studies of experimental poetics, published *Unoriginal Genius*, a book-length study of authorship in the experimental text, focusing specifically on texts produced by indeterminate or chance methods. Perloff concludes in her text that while these experimental texts may complicate the author's role, there is still an author and s/he can still (and often should) be regarded as a literary *genius*. She writes that even in texts that complicate authorship and originality, we cannot really “say that *genius* isn't in play. It just takes different forms” (21). Perloff not only relies too heavily on the Author for her analysis, she prizes it. By arguing that the formally experimental text, in its complications and refusals of authorship, maintains an Author (rather than an author-function), she essentially ignores poststructuralism's critiques in the name of *genius*.¹⁷

Anarchism and the Experiment: How do we read the illegible?

¹⁷ Comment by Kate Siklosi (18/6/13): “Right. I'm thinking through this lately with respect to Cage's (among many others) problematic relationship to authorship in terms of his writing through process. He renounces authorship of his Joyce texts, for the language used is in fact Joyce's, but the concept and the processing of the work is all his 'genius,' for lack of a better word. So, I'm wondering—can the conceptual poetic process itself be considered authorship, in terms of extending Foucault's definition of the author as 'practice'? This certainly becomes pertinent in digital poetics, which not only relies on an authorial 'processor' but also the reader's participation in the virtual 'practice' of poetic creation.”

Response (18/6/13): “And something like Flarf poetry, in which the process isn't the laborious writing through that Cage does, or even the work involved in Goldsmith's conceptual stuff, complicates this further. For Cage's work, and for others who do writing through stuff (I'm thinking of Mac Low here, too, because I am going to be writing on the two soon), I like to use the term 'initiator' over author, because I do see them as a spark. The match to the end-product-poem's candle, maybe. It starts it, but it really has nothing to do with the fire/flame. I think what's great about Cage is that as much as he makes choices/asks questions, there's really nothing Perloffian 'genius' about him. He constantly asserted in interviews that the questions he asked of texts were often not very unique/insightful, he just thought they might have interesting answers. So, he becomes famous for writing grade-school acrostic poems. At least, that's what I think.”

To work against the relatively conservative¹⁸ scholarship of Perloff, my project employs the work of Craig Dworkin, who often works closely with, and pays homage to, Perloff. Perloff's extensive bibliography has done its part to bring radically experimental poetry to the forefront of poetic study in the last twenty years. But, in light of the postanarchist literary theory this project seeks to establish, Dworkin's work is much more applicable, and ultimately more effective. This is best demonstrated in Dworkin's book-length study, *Reading the Illegible* (2003), published seven years before Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius*. *Reading the Illegible* is a meditation on the author-function in formally experimental poetic texts wherein Dworkin neither holds dear, nor laments the loss of, the Author and its claim to *genius*. Rather, he notes that poetics of "plagiarism," indeterminacy, and collaboration refuse notions of the Author, and instead privilege a *détournement*, Situationist author and activist Guy Debord's concept of the defamiliarization of the quotidian. Dworkin writes:

The antithesis of quotation, which marks and reinscribes authority,
*détournement*¹⁹ pursues a poetics of plagiarism in the tradition of [Comte de]

¹⁸ Here (in light of committee member Stephen Cain's comments) I am careful to distinguish Perloff's work as conservative relative to the work of other scholars, for example Dworkin, who considers the same experimental texts, but does so without (or with a less prominent influence from) the vestiges of a conservative, hermeneutically-driven scholarship.

¹⁹ Dworkin engages frequently in *Reading the Illegible* with the work of Guy Debord and his theorizations of Situationist experimentation. Most important for Dworkin is Debord's concept of *détournement*, which is articulated most clearly in Debord's "Methods of Detournement" (1956). In this statement, Debord argues that "[o]nly extremist innovation is historically justified" (1), and that the most extreme and effective forms of *détournement* (what he terms "ultradetournement") occur on the level of everyday life (5). In this way, the Situationists, and by proxy Dworkin, politicize the poetic form as defamiliarization, a break from the essentializing and reductive factors of the quotidian. *Detournement*, for both authors, is a form of parody, but rather than seeking comedic effect, it seeks to devalue the original (Debord 2).

Importantly, the Situationists, and their role in the May '68 riots in France, provide the artistic and literary backdrop for Barthes's and Foucault's arguments about authorship and readership. Thus, Debord's work, while not significantly referenced in my project, provides an important sociohistorical context to postanarchism's reevaluation of the relationships between author, reader, and text.

Lautréamont, whose infamous syllogism declares: “*Les idées s’améliorent. Le sens des mots y participe. Le plagiat est nécessaire, le progrès l’implique* [Ideas improve. The meaning of words plays a part in this development. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it].” (13)

While I will shy away from Dworkin’s (and Lautréamont’s) progressivist rhetoric, what is most important to note here is that *Reading the Illegible* does not dwell on authorship (as Perloff’s texts, including but not limited to *Unoriginal Genius*, are wont to do). Instead, Dworkin uses Lautréamont’s syllogism as if to accept all radical forms of authorship without reservation, and then moves on. The rest of his text examines the reader and the reading processes of formally experimental, “illegible,” or semantically nonsensical poetic texts, all the while refusing prescriptive ways of reading.²⁰ He states this explicitly in his introduction when he argues that “[p]art of what [he] hope[s] to establish ... through this book’s many close readings is an alternative strategy of reading itself” (xix). This alternative strategy of reading embraces the artifice, openness, indeterminacy, and politics that I have noted are integral to the experimental text. In this way, the experimental poem (to the chagrin of traditional literary studies), is read but not interpreted. In Dworkin’s own words: “If I have, at times, abjured interpretation in the following pages, it has only been to give onto *reading*” (xxiv, *emph. Dworkin’s*).

This shift from interpretation to reading recalls Lyotard’s skepticism of representation, and his desire for cultural artifacts that are not limited to the vicarious, substitutive function of denotation. Dworkin’s study argues that these experimental, illegible texts complicate both representation and denotation; their “active language,” that is, language that does not languish in

²⁰ In his introduction, for example, Dworkin writes: “In short, the basic thesis of this book is [REDACTED]” (*Reading the Illegible* xviii).

the denotative realm,²¹ demonstrates that “when language exceeds its communicative authority—in those moments when its familiar and overworked utility stutters to reveal its ‘fundamentally strange and foreign’ nature—one catches a glimpse of ‘the insubordination of words’” (11). Instead, Dworkin suggests a manner of reading (and perhaps, too, a manner of producing texts) in which communication is achieved without subordinating language to the limiting denotative process of Wittgenstein’s language-game of information.

Finally, it is important to note that this reading process is, for Dworkin, necessarily a communal practice, and one born out of the process of communication. He first makes this point implicitly in his reading of Susan Howe’s *Eikon Basilike*, when he notes “the repetition and emphasis of ‘common’ (‘in common,’ ‘communism,’ and twice with ‘common-wealth’) [which] gesture toward ‘communication’ through the Latin *communis* from which they all directly descend” (45). This may seem, on its own, unremarkable, until one understands that Dworkin reads Howe’s work as “noise”—that is, nonsemantic communication. But, he contends, “noise proliferates hand in hand with an increase in the terms of communication” (45). And, conversely, the proliferation of noise necessarily produces the *common*.²² The experimental, illegible texts, for Dworkin, produce in readers a *commonality*, a community based on the ethical, political dimensions to reading and engaging with the formally experimental text. He makes this political element explicit when, at the very end of *Reading the Illegible*, he writes:

²¹ Indeed, complicating semantics and denotation is central to the experimental poem, and especially to a postanarchist reading of that poem. But, I should note here that this complication of poetic denotation has long been a hallmark of formalist poetics. Consider, for example, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s now infamous note in *Zettel*: “Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information” (§106).

²² All uses of the term “common” throughout this project are meant to recall this first usage, borrowed from Dworkin, from Howe, and from the anarchist and postanarchist political theorists whose work is referenced in this introduction. It is meant to designate a site of communality rather than quotidian insignificance. I will work to make this distinction clear throughout my project, but want to signal it immediately to avoid confusion.

Whatever the value of the claims I have made in this book ... the mere fact of that hermeneutic activity ... should suggest an ethics of the illegible and remind us that the unreadable text is a *temporary autonomous zone*: one which refuses the permanence of its own constitution, and which calls on its readers to account for the semantic drives that they cannot, in the end, resist—and for which we must learn, as readers, to take responsibility. (155, *emph. mine*)

In light of this, I adapt Dworkin's work, along with the political philosophies outlined above, to be included in postanarchist literary theory. All of these elements—the proliferation of noise, the act of communication, the inevitable “hermeneutic activity” amidst the attempted resisting of “semantic drive,” and the responsibility that readers must take—produce a postanarchist literary theory that is, at its core, a theory of poetry as inherently communal.²³ Or, to be more precise, it is a theory of new activist reading practices that re-envision the production and reading of experimental texts as also producing the *common*.

²³ Comment by Samantha Bernstein (5/7/13): “If I understand rightly, you are suggesting that reading illegible texts makes us aware of the drive to classify/make coherent the world around us. This making of meaning, when properly scrutinized, seems a potentially powerful communal act. Indeed, as Dworkin and you suggest, we can no more resist our ‘semantic drives’ than our appetites—they are, I would imagine, part of our most basic brain structures that differentiate one thing from another. Though we should indeed take responsibility for them, why would we try to resist them? How does awareness of our own necessarily contingent, individual semantic drives generate community? Rejecting denotation, we embrace the multiplicity of meanings crouching behind seemingly rigid language; is community generated, then, by our willingness to have others’ meanings sprung upon us, a pounce that communicates—creates knowledge in us—but does not inform, or impart fixed information?”

Response (8/7/13): “You put it so beautifully. Yes, of course, we cannot refuse our semantic drives entirely. We would mumble ourselves into oblivion if we did. But, I do believe that there is something radically communal about leaving ourselves open to communicative noise, rather than viewing illegibility, ambiguity, and difference become blocks to our communication. On a practical level, this is good advice for relating to anyone; it’s all about embracing difference, and leaving ourselves open to the values of others. Radically experimental poetry, and the postanarchist theory I propose to read this poetry, true to that adverb, take this ‘good advice’ to the extreme. We can’t live like a radically experimental poem all the time, but poetry is the perfect site for linguistic/semantic play. And, as was true for us as children, the best play is one that teaches us a better and more responsible/attentive manner of living.”

Anarchism and the Experiment: “Poetry is radically communal”

The concept of language as a part of the common is one shared, implicitly, by all the poets in my project, in some form or another, but it is articulated most clearly and explicitly in Duncan’s work. For example, in a late poetic series, *Dante Études*, he writes:

Go, my songs, then in zealous
liberality, no longer mine,
but now the friendship of the
Reader’s heart and mind. (*Ground Work* 126)

Stephen Collis argues that this linguistic commonality is central to Duncan’s poetic and political theories. For Duncan, Collis argues, “language is the commons: we all have equal rights to enter there—permission to return to the common source. . . . Poetry is a gift of the *givenness* of language and no poet holds property rights over it, but owes it his or her service and responsibility. Poetry is radically communal” (“A Duncan Etude” n.p.). The indeterminacy, the engagement of the reading community, the anarchic themes of attentiveness and interconnectivity, and the politics of responsibility that run throughout the very notion of the poetic experiment (and that are central to the texts studied in this project) emphasize the importance of understanding language, and poetic language especially, as a major feature of the *common*. That is, the common, as elaborated upon by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, is constituted by, and of, love as a political concept and a resistance tactic.²⁴ They write: “Every act

²⁴ Comment by Sean Braune (19/5/14): “I love the invocation of love—love as disruptive. I think about this in similar terms in relation to Cage, namely that love is something illegible and nonsensical that pushes, pulls, ties up, and liberates subjects (becoming-subjects or just coming-subjects). However, ‘love’ is this big and empty signifier: an aporia of projection—one person’s ‘love’ is another person’s Hallmark card. I guess I’m asking where this ‘common’ is located. Where on earth are these spaces of revolutionary potential—such as Bey’s TAZ, Foucault’s

of love is an ontological event in that it marks a rupture with existing being and creates new being. ... To say that love is ontologically constitutive then, simply means that it produces the common” (*Commonwealth* 181). As such, the traditional prioritization and valorisation of the author figure, in its privileging of a single voice, and its subsequent resistance to conversation (which Casarino, in my epigram, suggests is the hallmark of the linguistic common), is an example of the common as corrupt. Consequently, as the texts I study work to problematize or resist authorship, they also work to construct a poetic language that is “radically communal.”

Hardt and Negri’s conceptions of the common show us that Duncan’s notions of the communal nature of language are, to an extent, naïve. They note in their preface to *Commonwealth* that language, although a part of the common, is becoming increasingly privatized (ix). And, indeed, many other critical theorists have argued that language (through its language-game of giving and receiving information, its substitutive process) is itself inequitable,

heterotopia, or Hardt and Negri’s common—supposed to be hidden? (I’m sitting in a coffee shop while I’m typing this and I know this is NOT the common). If the common is a space of postanarchism (and it destabilizes and deterritorializes hegemonic structures of culture and language), then it needs to be un-common. The illegibility needs to be graffitied on the walls, or are there walls? My issue has always been that these liminal spaces of resistance are typically abstract: insofar as Foucault offers examples of heterotopias, one wonders if these examples truly encompass his self-declared definition. Does writing happen in the common? Does love?”

Response by Jessica Matouzzi (19/5/14): “I’m wondering if this inability to speak the location of the ‘common’ might actually be construed as an advantage—or at least as a strategy for avoiding the space’s incursion and reification by corporate profit-making schemes, governmental repression, or both. For me, the magic of anarchism lies in the fact that the forms resistance will take can’t be dictated in advance, since they arise out of dialogue and shifting participant constituencies. For historical accounts, this requires unflagging inductiveness and collective authorship. But literary theorizing presents a more difficult methodological issue, precisely *because* it’s theorizing—I’m not sure what the most rigorous way to address this issue might be, but it’s definitely something I struggle with in my own work.”

Response (1/6/14): “I would absolutely agree that the inability to speak the location of the common is an advantage, but I also share Sean’s frustration with the fact that the inherent deterritorialization of the common renders it annoyingly abstract. Love indeed happens there, ‘writing’ may or may not. Your point about theory and methodology is an interesting one, too. I often wonder if my attempts to transcribe these moments of the common, of a radically communal textual relationship, could ever do anything except stratify what might otherwise be in flux. From what all three of us are saying here, it would seem that we all share these frustrations. And none of us have answers.”

predicated on the exclusion of others for its expression.²⁵ Hardt and Negri propose a common that is not, as Duncan's work here may suggest, a purely public space, but rather one that seeks alternatives to the binary: "neither private nor public, neither capitalist nor socialist ... [but one that] opens a new space for politics" (ix). Central to the common, and to the commonality of language, then, is an embracing of the mutability of human nature and of individual subjectivity. What biopolitics shows us is that "human nature" is always in flux (353). And, this argument has, as I have demonstrated, deep roots in the classical anarchist tradition. To this end, the best way to experiment with (and against) biopolitical production is to embrace this flux, to move from identity to deleuzoguattarian becoming (x).

This shift is evident in the way that the experimental text disrupts or refuses authorship, but, Hardt and Negri maintain, a revolutionary politics cannot exist solely through the refusal of identity, an argument with which the feminist writers of my project would strongly agree. After all, as Howe famously stated in a 2008 interview, the complete refusal of authorship and identity is "alluring—but problematic for women writing/reading poems" (Guthrie np). Instead, Hardt and Negri argue that "revolutionary politics has to start from identity but cannot end there. ... Identity is a weapon of the republic of property, but one that can be turned against it" (*Commonwealth* 326). This process begins, for them, with an attack on invisibility, a reclamation of the means of production of subjectivity, and, ultimately, a shift from stratified identity to a singularity in flux (327-333). In language, this shift can occur only when the text refuses the representation that Lyotard and May both critique above because representation, Hardt and Negri argue, turns singularities into concrete identities (346). Instead, they propose a production of the

²⁵ See, for example, Jacques Lacan's "Signification of the Phallus," Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak," Jacques Derrida's "Disseminations," or Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which is Not One*. Also of interest are Helene Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa," or Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, for their notions of experimentation as a means out of the exclusionary nature of linguistic signification.

common (a production which necessitates alternatives to the language-games that stratify) that relies not on anti-globalization, but rather alter-globalization, that moves beyond opposition and resistance and into the creative process of experimentation (102-104). The common is the production of a revolutionary politics that relies on collective social expression, and here we return to the concept of love. For Hardt and Negri, and for this project as a whole, love is the productivity *of* and *in* the common (xii). It is a physical force and a political action, but one that embraces flux, seeks alternatives, disrupts representation and expression, and engages the social in collective responsibility within and to itself.²⁶ Love is responsible to, and part of, the common; it does not rely on the binarism of individual and society, of self and other, but rather embraces the varied connections between individuals that exist exclusively in flux. Indeed, Hardt and Negri's conception of love here is virtually synonymous with experimentation as postanarchist literary theory defines it.

What Does a Postanarchist Literary Theory Look Like?: The Crisis of Representation

What becomes clear at this point is that the core of an anarchist (and, to that same end, a postanarchist) literary theory is a critique of representation. It is not surprising, then, that the only scholar who explicitly attempts to develop an anarchist literary theory, Jesse Cohn, focuses precisely on this concern. His book-length study on the subject, *Anarchism and the Crisis of*

²⁶ Comment by Samantha Bernstein (5/7/13): "Love 'is a physical force and a political action, but one that embraces flux, seeks alternatives, disrupts representation and expression, and engages the social in collective responsibility within and to itself.' Indeed! And, beautifully, we can love what we don't yet know or will never know; we can love possibilities. Love is maybe largely the embrace of/penetration by what can never be fully legible. Love brings the willingness to be disrupted, the belief that such disruption is generative. A perfect philosophy for the ways of reading you are proposing."

Response (8/7/14): "'We can love what we don't yet know or will never know'—Yes!!And we can let postanarchism take this one step further: love as radical politics/poetics is embracing a lack of 'knowledge.' This can sound Keatsian (and it is, in a sense, a revisionist negative capability—those Romantics were nothing if not good anarchists). I want it to be taken further. Not simply accepting that I do not understand, cannot ever adequately communicate, but celebrating the fact that this lack means a freedom from the limiting structures of Truth! The dancing at Emma Goldman's revolution."

Representation (2006), “calls into question the relationships between our concepts and the truths they mean to denote, our images and the realities they are supposed to depict” (11). In efforts to create unifying and clearly expressionist systems of meaning-making (on the level of language, but also on those of genre, canon, tradition, etc), these representative systems, in essence, speak to (and thus, *for*) the multitude, and in turn silence its multiplicity (12). Cohn admits early on that writers and readers cannot reject all representation—it is, after all, requisite for signification—but, rather, that an anarchist literary theory necessitates viewing representation as a relationship of power (13). For this reason, Cohn’s work privileges prose texts²⁷ with decentered, polyphonic, or rhizomatic narratives that present a collage of multiple voices rather than the single perspective of a narrator (172). Additionally, he notes that the politics of form and style are necessarily limited to issues of audience interpretation (181). In these cases, Cohn’s work walks the line between an anarchist literary theory and the now out-dated relativism that marks postmodernism. That is, by allowing for this decentering on the level of the text and relying instead on a highly individualized hermeneutic interpretation on the level of the reader, Cohn’s work does not really constitute a radical anarchist re-envisioning of the reading process.²⁸

What really sets Cohn’s work apart is its assertion that an anarchist literary theory must

²⁷ For example, Cohn’s literary readings focus on writers like Leo Tolstoy (who has clear and frequently discussed anarchist sympathies).

²⁸ Comment by Jesse Cohn (28/4/14): “I just ran across your really fascinating dissertation/blog project, and I’m flattered to be cited there. I think you may misread me at a few points, though. May I offer a couple of comments? First of all, I really didn’t mean to propose ‘an affective reader-response theory (à la Stanley Fish)’; after all, I spend a good deal of time taking Fish and Rorty to task for exactly that (reducing the text to whatever the reader wishes to make of it). You also seem to quote my book in a way that takes material out of context... Attributing these statements to me is misleading, because in that passage, if you reread it in the context of the chapter, I’m characterizing (fairly critically!) the views of someone else (Mike Michael, an Actor Network Theorist). I definitely don’t believe that individuality is prior or superior to community, or that real freedom is necessarily ‘difference without unity’; my sympathies are pretty definitely with the social and communitarian tendencies in the anarchist tradition. I’m sorry—I know that book wasn’t my best writing (it’s dense, overly quotational, and jargon-ridden), and I’m sure this isn’t what anyone engaged in a dissertation process wants to hear, but I wanted to take the opportunity to clarify my position, and I hope it doesn’t come across as adversarial. There are so few of us working in this area, and if anything, we ought to practice mutual aid!”

always be understood as a dialectic between identification and disidentification (177). That is, in some ways pre-empting the Hardt and Negri text that would come three years later, Cohn suggests a reading and writing strategy that begins with identification and subjectivity, and turns that tool against the text and its representation, in order to embrace both singularity and multiplicity. Cohn asserts, then, that we can, and must, read identitarian subjectivities as products of coalition rather than hegemony (244). While the destabilization of the subjectivity that poststructuralism and postmodernism ushered in may have done away with universalisms and claims about “human nature,” Cohn notes that it “has all too often produced ... unity in the form of unstable alliances and single-issue reformist activism” (242). The answer, then, is singularity in the form of radical²⁹ difference. Embracing this singularity, Cohn’s anarchist society is a series of networked communities, extreme regionalism, and affiliation rather than filiation (253). This translates directly to his conceptions of anarchist reading and writing practices, which would entail a “representational politics of duration and difference, motion and multiplicity” (256). And yet, *Anarchism and the Crisis of Representation*, despite its explicit concern with anarchist politics and aesthetics, shies away from developing a literary theory out of anarchism.

This theory proper would follow a year later, in Cohn’s “What is Anarchist Literary Theory?” published in *Anarchist Studies* in 2007. Making note of the fact that the anarchist tradition has long been concerned with issues of cultural production, artistic practice, and linguistic politics, Cohn asserts that an “anarchist literary theory draws its inspiration from the body of thought and practices which have historically comprised the anarchist movement” (1). Cohn’s anarchist literary theory reads ethically as anarchist, “with the aim of determining what

²⁹ Cohn’s anarchist difference is indeed radical. He writes that “an anarchist social order cannot impose such a spurious unity [as proposed by filiative communities], but must embrace cultural, aesthetic, even religious and political diversity” (252).

kind of relationships the text offers to bring about between ourselves and one another, between ourselves and the world” (3). In this way, anarchist literary theory, as I have detailed, is primarily concerned with the relationship between text and reader. As Cohn goes on to write:

an ethical approach to the text cannot simply mean a receptive or empathetic reading, in which we merely submit to its terms, nor can it mean a purely active reading, reading as the “use” or violent “appropriation” of the text; instead of positing ourselves as the slaves or the masters of texts, we ought to place ourselves into a dynamic relation with them, to see each encounter with them as a dialogue fraught with risk and promise. (7)

Here, the anarchist literary theory Cohn develops recalls the poststructuralist contemplations of readership, and even Dworkin’s endeavour to produce new forms of reading and writing about *illegible* poetry.³⁰ What it seems to ignore is the role of the authorial presence in the production of the literary artefact, a presence that a postanarchist literary tradition sees as quintessential to the role of the reader. Cohn’s critiques of representation, his concern with individuality and the collective, and his interest in liberating language from the substitutive function of information-giving all make his work invaluable to the notion of a postanarchist literary theory. But, in his attempts to value the reader and the ethical dimensions of the relationship between audience and text, he overlooks the necessary third-party in that relationship: the Author, whom the postanarchic reader must confront; the author-function, necessary for understanding the text’s social context; and, the authorial presence of intrusive, annotative readers.

What Does a Postanarchist Literary Theory Look Like?: Hypertext

³⁰ It should be noted here that Cohn is a vocal critic of postanarchism, and especially the controversial connotations of the post prefix. For Cohn’s aversion to postanarchism, see “‘What is “Postanarchism” Post?’ Review of Saul Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power.*” *Postmodern Culture* 13.1 (Sept. 2002), or “What’s Wrong with Postanarchism?” (co-authored with Shawn Wilbur).

To account for both the aesthetic and political anarchism of experimental form, and to attempt to recreate the common through engagement with reader, writer, and critic, my dissertation itself takes on an experimental form, which I will touch on briefly now, but will explain in greater detail in my treatise on the dissertation form at the end of this introduction. As both an insurrectionary tactic and as a means of navigating the potential limitations of a more traditional print-based dissertation form, my project is made up of a series of short single-author chapters linked through hypertext.³¹ According to George Landow, who stood at the forefront of critical hypertext theory in the academy, the form of the hypertext allows us, as readers and critics, to develop reading and writing practices that work towards “abandon[ing] conceptual systems founded on ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity and replac[ing] them [with] ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks” (*Hypertext* 1). Landow stresses that “hypertext blurs the boundaries between reader and writer” (4), and engages with an “active, intrusive reader [who] can annotate a text” (11), rather than a passive reader who consumes even as s/he reads critically. And indeed, the reader of a hypertext *produces* the text as s/he reads. While, as I have argued, the experimental text similarly provokes the reader to produce the text as s/he reads, hypertext makes this turn to the writerly text, and its concomitant engagement with its audience, more manifest. Because of this, hypertext is particularly well-suited for my project.

³¹ Comment by Jessica Matouzzi (19/5/14): “I have a question regarding the form of the dissertation; why the single-author format, given your desire to further problematize and re-define the Author-function? Also wondering why you focus on poetry rather than prose?”

Response (1/6/14): “On poetry: 1) It’s always been my baby, and I’m not ready to let it go yet. But, more importantly, 2) I am interested in the ways that authorship is disrupted through high formalization, and I rarely if ever see this enacted in a way I find useful in prose (save Danielewski, perhaps, some digital prose, occasionally Murakami who I am only now getting into). On the form of this diss: I imagine the sections of plateaus as single-text rather than single-author, but I take your point. I also look at a lot of interviews and poetics written by the authors themselves, so I do pay significant attention to the writer. I would say first that the writer is not the author, and to conflate the two can be a very dangerous path. But, I also think that the only way to look at how the text disrupts traditional authorship is to look precisely at the hand writing and to discuss the ways in which this writing-person gets translated to and distanced from the Author-figure and the Author-function.”

Additionally, the critical theorists that inform my work are all sympathetic to the rhizomatic, technology-based structure at the heart of the hypertext form.³² So, the chapters of my dissertation will produce careful readings of the texts, and will include rigorous studies of the scholarship surrounding each author, but will always be informed by a sense of *jouissance*. Essentially, my work has produced two different dissertations: the first is linked through the rhizomatic structure of the web, and takes the form of blog-like entries through which readers can engage with my own writing; the second is this static capturing of the process on paper, able to be distributed and defended as a traditional print-based dissertation, wherein the rhizomatic structure of this project is made momentarily arborescent.

Landow's philosophy of the hypertext is clearly linked with Hardt and Negri's notion of the common, and with the ethical and political concerns of the postanarchists discussed above, through its new approach to the author-function, which Landow aligns with the "erosion of the self" (71). This is achieved, he notes, through the invitation of the reader into the text, an invitation he characterizes as an intrusion. He writes:

Like contemporary critical theory, hypertext reconfigures—rewrites—the author in several obvious ways. ... [T]he figure of the hypertext author approaches, even if it does not entirely merge with, that of the reader; the functions of reader and writer become more deeply entwined with each other than ever before. ... [I]t infringes upon the power of the writer, removing some of it and granting it to the reader. (71)

In this way, hypertext, in its rhizomatic structure, and through its engagement with the reader,

³² Landow writes: "Like Barthes, Foucault, and Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Derrida continually uses the terms link (*liasons*), web (*toile*), network (*rèseau*), and interwoven (*s'y tissent*), which cry out for hypertextuality" (53). He could have easily appended Deleuze and Guattari, and Lyotard to this list.

works to complicate (though it never completely escapes) the hierarchical relationship between author and reader. By taking on a hypertext form, my work uses this complication to mimic a similar complication of authorship and readership in the experimental text, as seen throughout this introduction. Of course, the hypertext is not without its own problems; as it engages in semantic meaning and expression, it necessarily falls victim to those representative faults critiqued by postanarchists and poststructuralists alike (indeed, any attempt at normative or comprehensible communication would fall into this trap). This project instead proposes, as Landow suggests, that the hypertext is one, potentially more egalitarian, way of approaching a postanarchist reading practice, another rhizomatic node in postanarchism's theories of reading and activism.³³ Landow has, of course, gone slightly out of favour with digital humanists as he, despite his numerous attempts to update newer versions of his seminal *Hypertext*, could not possibly anticipate the movement of digital literatures. I include him in this project because he functions as a bridge between the poststructuralism that forms the foundation of postanarchism and the radical potentials of the digital that this project works to embrace.

Appendix": A Treatise on the Dissertation Form

As a digital, hypertextual project, my dissertation is made up an introductory section, eight single-author studies presented in four chapters. Each single-author study is approximately thirty print-pages, and each shares three primary concerns: how is authorship contrived, complicated, or restricted? how is the commonality of language approached? and, how can we

³³ Comment by Jesse Cohn (28/5/14): "I do wonder if Landow didn't slightly underestimate the 'intrusive' aspect of readers' interactions with online text. Hope the comments section of this blog-dissertation escapes what seems to be the iron law of the internet—where there be comments, there be trolls. It's a brave experiment in so many respects!"

Response (29/5/14): "I think he might have. In a lot of ways, his ideas of hypertext are dated. I have been lucky in that most people don't care to read about postanarchism and poetry, so I haven't gotten many trolls. But, I also haven't gotten many comments. So, that's a double-edged sword."

employ a postanarchist reading practice to these texts to reimagine reading and writing as activist practice? In their digital forms, each was written and posted over the course of approximately six weeks, and incorporated my responses to and analyses of the primary texts and the scholarship that surrounds them, in addition to interventionary reading tactics (my own and the interventions of invited readers from various positions—academic, creative, activist, or simply interested—who could comment on or annotate my readings). As these entries accumulated to form chapters, they openly spoke to each other by way of hypertext links that united the sections themselves and directed readers to external sources. In this way, the original digital text approached a deleuzoguattarian rhizome. What you are holding is the aforementioned static capture of this process that transcribes the entries and includes some comments and connections in the form of footnotes and can thus be presented and defended as a print-based dissertation. Most importantly, my work positions each hyperlinked chapter as a plateau,³⁴ as a Temporary Autonomous Zone that functions at once as meditation and insurrection.³⁵

³⁴ I use the term “plateau” much in the same way Deleuze and Guattari use it: “A plateau is always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end. A rhizome is made out of plateaus. ... We call a ‘plateau’ any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome” (*A Thousand* 21-22). Brian Massumi, in his forward, puts this another way: “Each ‘plateau’ is an orchestration of crashing bricks extracted from a variety of disciplinary edifices” (*A Thousand* xiv).

³⁵ Comment by Sean Braune (19/5/13): “This concept is really wonderful and I love it. A gutsy move because we all know that the dissertation is a draconian artefact of a terminally-ill print era (we are all good posthumans nowadays). My question though is maybe more pragmatic and too academic (not at all anarchistic): does this blog method essentially ‘publish’ your dissertation as you write it? and if so, then what happens when you really want to publish it or excerpt it for journal articles? Academics fight nowadays to not have their dissertation .pdfs uploaded to ProQuest Dissertations (bartering for a two to three year ‘grace period’ before it gets uploaded) because publishing houses consider such online archivization ‘publishing.’ So my question is I guess a very non-anarchist and conservative one. Do you have any reservations about publishing portions/pieces of this wonderful and original project online beforehand? (Incidentally, I hate that this is even a question because part of what makes your idea and approach so radical is the presentation of it in a digital commons where colleagues and friends can engage with your thinking. So I hate the question).”

Chapter One: Making Noisy Analogies: John Cage and Jackson Mac Low

Despite the dramatic rise in critical attention paid to John Cage's work over the last decade, his poetic sequence "62 Mesostics re Merce Cunningham" (1973) has garnered little critical attention. The sequence is a difficult one to deal with in scholarship: its unique typography makes quotation cumbersome; it is semantically nonsensical, and often visually undecipherable; and it invites readers into dangerous exegesis via biography with Cage's dedication of the piece to his life partner, Merce Cunningham. And yet, the piece is actually emblematic of Cage's poetics generally, especially in that it makes manifest Cage's creation of an active, engaged readership that runs throughout his work. In their refusal of exegesis and of clear hermeneutical analysis, the Cunningham mesostics invite readers into a communication that values commonality and connection above all. In this way, they prove themselves to be vital to Cage's oeuvre. Before I get into my own readings of this particular sequence, I would like to begin where many scholars start their work on Cage: with his silence. Silence is central to an understanding of Cage's work (in poetry, prose, music, and visual art), and it has been a point of scholarly contestation since academics began discussing these pieces in any depth. Part of the reason that Cage's silence has become so integral to his scholarship is that, despite the recent exponential growth¹ of Cagean scholarship, he remains best known for his musical composition "4'33" (1952), a composition in three parts in which the musician (traditionally a single pianist) does not play for the duration of the piece. The result is that the audience (usually equal parts uncomfortable and attentive) is forced to listen to atmospheric and environmental sounds, and

¹ The last fifteen years have seen a particular increase in book-length studies of Cage's work in music and poetry as in David Berenstein and Christopher Hatch's *Writings Through John Cage's Music, Poetry, + Art* (2001), David W. Patterson's *John Cage: Music, Philosophy, and Intention, 1933-1950* (2002), David Nicholl's *John Cage* (2007), Julia Robinson's *John Cage* (2011), and perhaps most popularly Kay Larson's extensive biographical study, *Where the Heart Beats* (2012).

especially the impromptu sounds of each other's discomfort. The general reception of the piece, both contemporary and contemporaneous, as Kyle Gann's book-length study, *No Such Thing as Silence*, demonstrates, is that it is some sort of pretentious joke, a kind of Emperor's New Clothes. The average review, Gann points out, judged the composition as pointless: it says nothing; it is not art.

It is this reaction to the many manifestations of silence in Cage's work that Jonathan D. Katz responds to in "Identification," an essay that essentially revolutionized readings of Cagelan silence by asserting that Cage's refusal to communicate in a conventional sense is a mixture of both "camouflage *and* contestation" (51). That is, Katz demonstrates that this silence—which includes but is not limited to Cage's politics of non-engagement both in his personal politics and his compositional poetics—is emblematic of a queer passivity and resistance in the manifestly homophobic climate of post-McCarthy Cold War America.² Katz's arguments are, in addition to being a radical rereading of Cage's work, a response to Moira Roth's seminal readings of Cage, in "The Aesthetic of Indifference." Roth argues that Cage's work, especially *4'33"* (where the silence is literal), expresses "no messages, no feelings, and no ideas" because such things could not be articulated in the restrictive, oppressive atmosphere of America's contemporaneous political climate (41). Roth admits that "Cage would object to such an interpretation," especially because Cage imagined that the refusal of conventional meaning would allow for the production of, and more importantly in light of my project's emphasis on readership, the reception of, new

² Indeed, the Cunningham mesostics are emblematic of a post-McCarthy era and its concomitant fear of homosexuality, and of political dissent (both of which clearly mark the piece). But, it is even more important to note that *4'33"* was first performed in 1952, while Joseph McCarthy still held his position as Senator, and was right in the middle of the "Lavender Scare" (the name now given to McCarthy's witch-hunt against homosexuals in government positions). For more information on McCarthyism and its abuses of homosexuals, see David K. Johnson's acclaimed book-length study, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*.

meanings or new ways of meaning (41). Nonetheless, Roth maintains that Cage's work suggests an indifference to a policy that was seemingly indifferent to him as a homosexual. While Roth attempts to show how this silence can move from negative to positive, from passive to active (ie. from silenced to refusing), her work maintains that a lack of conventional meaning equals a lack of *any* meaning. Most importantly, Roth dismisses Cage's poetics of silence as *apolitical* (36).

Instead, Katz proposes that this "indifference" is not, as Roth would have it, an *apolitical* position, but rather a position outside of conventional politics. After all, Cage always insisted that he was not particularly interested in politics proper: "I am interested in social ends, but not in political ends, because politics deals with power, and society deals with numbers of individuals" (Kostelanetz 274). Katz also objects to Roth's designation of Cage's silence as a refusal to engage because it assumes that a choice was made. He writes, "her [Roth's] implication that they [his contemporaries, a group that includes Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Cunningham] did not become involved assumes that they could have" ("Identification" 53). I would go much further than Katz here, because what he calls Roth's "implication" is not implied at all, but rather plainly stated. Roth argues that Cage and these contemporaries either willingly or instinctively decided on silence rather than an oppositional engagement. Worse, Roth characterizes this silence as lamentable and cowardly:

to have chosen, consciously or not, to advocate indifference and neutrality as a psychological and intellectual way out of the impasse of the McCarthy period was perhaps not a courageous stance but, in retrospect, was understandable in view of the paralyzing effect that the early 50s had on so many intellectuals. (46)

Katz, on the other hand, does not ignore the clearly oppressive elements of this silence, and argues instead that Cage's silence is both due to oppression and is itself a kind of resistance. In a

later essay, “John Cage’s Queer Silence; or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse,” Katz clarifies this argument, insisting that “there are *both* surrender *and* resistance in these silences” (53, *emph. mine*). While Katz does a great service to Cage studies in redeeming this silence as, at least in part, political, his language is tellingly dualistic, despite his arguments in “Queer Silence” about Cage’s non-oppositional politics.³ In “surrender” and “resistance,” he captures the classical anarchist elements of Cage’s work, and the clear anti-authoritarian elements. But, this also fails to recognize that Cage persistently shied away from oppositional politics, and instead embraced a world of alternative and experimentation. As Christopher Shultis explains in *Silencing the Sounded Self: John Cage and the American Experimental Tradition*, an objection to dualism has always been a prominent feature of Cage’s work. Shultis writes that Cage, following in the tradition of Thoreau, attempts to forge “a nondual universe where coexistence replaces control—where there is no need for reconciliation because there are no opposites” (33). Katz, instead, paints a dualistic picture in which Cage feels oppressed, and therefore remains silent as if to refuse the oppression; it’s an oppositional strategy, and one to which Cage constantly seeks alternatives. While Katz’s work here may have opened up new potential readings, the explanation it affords us as readers of Cagean silence is ultimately unsatisfactory.

The looming presence of Joseph McCarthy was not the only oppressive force leading Cage to silence. The American art community, and especially the New York school, where Cage and Cunningham conducted the bulk of their creative work, was dominated by abstract

³ Nonetheless, the danger of reading Cage’s politics as oppositional is underscored by Katz, who notes that “Once marked as oppositional, any disturbance can be incorporated into a discourse of oppositionality that only catalyzes oppressive constructions” (59). Andy Weaver, in his dissertation chapter on Cage, “Not Understanding, But Undergoing: John Cage’s ‘Writing for the Second Time Through Finnegans Wake’” notes that, in light of this danger, Cage’s silence is an attempt to move beyond such binaries, in order to expand the field of play” (*Indeterminacy* 159). Despite this, I maintain that Katz’s language ends up placing Cagean silence into the very dualism it looks to disturb.

expressionist artists who were attracting public attention for their avant-garde⁴ works. Led by the very public personas of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and Franz Kline, the New York art scene was permeated, from the '40s into the early '60s, by what Roth calls a “machismo attitude” that clearly opposed Cage’s non-oppositional politics and its seeming “indifference” (37). The abstract expressionists relied heavily on both the persona of the artist and the expression of meaning (however abstracted).⁵ This, then, brings me to my discussion of the “62 Mesostics re Merce Cunningham.” These mesostics,⁶ in their nonsemantic lines joined by a combination of chance procedure and clearly defined parameters, the virtual illegibility of most of the “words,” and the persistent repetition, all resist conveying meaning in the conventional sense. For Cage, this resistance to conventional meaning is a resistance to an expressive power over the reader (and here the poems lend themselves quite clearly to a postanarchist reading practice), but it is also a resistance to being “read” by the audience. As Katz goes on to write, for Cage “meaning was concomitant with interpolation, the act of being read by another” (55). So, Cage’s work gets characterized by Katz as “unexpressive expressionism” (62), another unsatisfactory term that begs the question: if, as Katz asserts, Cage wants to refuse expression, why express at all?

A postanarchist reading of Cage’s poetics of silence undercuts Katz’s designation of an “unexpressive expressionism,” understanding Cage’s work as engaging in a proliferation of *noise*, which is to say that it seeks to communicate rather than to express. Noise, as understood

⁴ As my discussions of this term in my introduction would indicate, my use of the term “avant-garde” to describe Pollock, de Kooning, and the other abstract expressionists, is purposeful and political.

⁵ See, for example, Hans Namuth’s short films *Jackson Pollock* and *Jackson Pollock 51* for a demonstration of the way the authorial persona of the artist and his intention dominate the production and reception of Pollock’s work.

⁶ Cage coins and defines the term “mesostic” as, quite simply, like an acrostic poem but with the spine down the centre.

by communication theories, is a break in communication, an external entry into the message that disturbs its eventual delivery. Communication still occurs, but it is not “successful” in that it is no longer “sensical.” When this communicative understanding of noise is adapted into poetic study by Craig Dworkin in *Reading the Illegible*, “noise” becomes a multiplication of meaning, an overabundance of sense that, in turn, renders the message nonsensical, illogical,⁷ and thus a kind of terrorism or violence against a militarized⁸ language. While, in this case, Dworkin is discussing the work of Susan Howe, who I will also discuss much later in this project, his observations regarding noise are relevant to Cage’s silence. “[N]oise,” he writes, “proliferates hand in hand with an increase in the terms of communication” (45). And, more importantly, he

⁷ Comment by Andy Weaver (19/08/13): “Is ‘illogical’ stumbling back into binarism (is Cage attempting something more... alogical, if that’s possible?).”

Response (20/08/13): “Illogical, I think, only falls back into an unhelpful binarism so long as we maintain a 0-1 binaric understanding of a logical/illogical system. If we, instead, position the illogical as an alternative to this binary (something akin to Kristeva’s 0-2 doubleness of poetic language), then illogic becomes not the negative side of a two-part system, but rather an alternative to, or perhaps an outside of, this system. That is only partially a cop out. I think that extracting nonsense from a logico-sensical system is integral to understanding how Cage’s work plays with otherwise overcoded sign systems.”

⁸ Comment by Andy Weaver (19/08/13): “Would Cage, a committed pacifist, agree with Dworkin’s (and yours?) endorsement of ‘terrorism or violence against a militarized language’? Maybe something like David Bernstein’s application of Raymond Williams’s ‘alternative culture’ rather than ‘oppositional culture’ to describe Cage’s stance might be more appropriate?”

Response (20/08/13): “It is on this note that Cage’s poetics, and my (and Dworkin’s) criticism part ways. Cage believes in an anarchic pacifism, but my own anarchism, and the theorizations that Dworkin provides, instead propose that a linguistic anarchism (a poetic anarchism, a literary TAZ) is necessarily a violence against organizational structures. Certainly, Cage would be disgruntled with some elements of my reading of his work (his distaste for even literary violence is perhaps best demonstrated by his writings-through of Ezra Pound). But I maintain that dismantling linguistic structure the way Cage does is a violent, terrorist act whether the man would concede to that or not.”

Comment by Andy Weaver (21/08/13): “I’m still not convinced about Cage as violent terrorist. Is it possible to adjust the terminology, I wonder? It’s certainly true that some readers/listeners are terrorized by Cage’s work (or at least outraged, which seems to be much the same thing, aesthetically), but ‘violence’? That seems a tougher argument. Can there be such a thing as a non-violent terrorism? Could we meet mid-way, by thinking of Cage’s work as transgressive or destructive, rather than violent. Of course, Lyotard’s notion of education as violence is one I agree with, and so perhaps my arguments are undone? Perhaps I merely want you to define ‘violence’ in relation to Cage’s disruption of language codes?”

notes that noise, rather than merely engaging in what Wittgenstein famously calls “the language-game of giving information” (*Zettel* §106), instead contains the “potential to disrupt the message, to unsettle the code of the status quo” (*Reading the Illegible* 39). Thus, it is our responsibility, as the audience of Cage’s work—poetic, musical, or otherwise—to allow this communication (to enter into the *comunis* of communication) without requiring that the text make its expressions. As such, the “62 Mesostics re Merce Cunningham,” articulate a noisy silence, much like a theatre full of people anxiously listening as David Tudor does not play. Accepting that, as Cage so frequently contended, silence is more than simply the absence of sound, the mesostics articulate a silence in line with the one Michael O’Driscoll defines in his discussion of Cage’s work. O’Driscoll writes, “If ambient sounds are called silent only because they do not form a part of a music intention, then Cage’s poetic assemblages (made up of ambient or, better, empty words), are silent texts, texts without intention, without meaning, without purpose” (632). In the sequence’s illegibility, in the ways that the already nonsensical language overlaps and obscures itself, the reader is forced to see how language gets coded and overcoded, and to critique the ways in which this overcoding produces a limiting and oppressive violence.⁹

Alongside Cage, Jackson Mac Low is one of the few authors in my project who self-identifies as anarchist. Similar to Cage’s anarchism, Mac Low’s politics are largely dependent on non-engagement, on allowing individuals to exist and enact their desires as they see fit.

However, while Cage’s anarchism is particularly concerned with how to exist as anarchist in a society that is definitively not anarchic, Mac Low’s politics are seemingly more utopian. Cage’s

⁹ To scapegoat McCarthy once more, the violence he enacted on the victims of the “Lavender” and “Red” Scares was, in addition to an economic and sometimes physical violence, very much a violence of language, a language game of naming in which the individual is coded (as communist, as homosexual) by the State, publicly, but not communally. By refusing this language-game, Cage implicitly critiques those structures that label and limit him, as author, as lover, as anarchist.

work, such as the example of the “62 Mesostics re Merce Cunningham,” is interested in using the pre-existing tools of poetic language to work towards something outside of interpretation and representation.¹⁰ Mac Low, on the other hand, uses the performative elements of his work as a means to reproduce a utopian (free, communal) anarchist society on a microcosmic scale. This is a major preoccupation of Mac Low’s work throughout his career, as he asserts in the *Jacket* conversation transcript, “Making Poetry ‘Otherwise,’” when he states: “I am still to some real extent an anarchist. . . . Anarchy simply means people are making their own decisions.” In this sense, the other elements of Mac Low’s poetics that I will examine—the interplay of chance and authorial engagement, the potentialities of reading as performance, the problem of literary tradition in the quest of the unique—must all be read as elements of an anarchist poetics that envisions what a purely anarchist society would look like. As I will demonstrate, Mac Low also works through how artistic practice can be an activist practice that enables its producers and perceivers to come closer to that anarchist utopia.

For my purposes, it is important to first recognize that Mac Low’s desire to see political affect in his art is loosely related to his inclusion in the Fluxus School of the avant-garde. However, while other Fluxus-affiliated artists, such as George Maciunas, saw the goal of Fluxus as the purging of “bourgeois sickness, ‘intellectual,’ professional & commercialized culture” (“Manifesto”) through the incorporation of the quotidian into artistic practice, Mac Low’s outlook is the entire opposite. Contradicting Maciunas’s anti-art view, Mac Low argues that he

¹⁰ It could be argued that some of Cage’s performance-based pieces, such as his earlier percussive work, or the *Musicircus*, function as sorts of utopian societies, as Charles Junkerman suggests in “‘nEw / foRms of living together’: The Model of the *Musicircus*.” He argues that the politics of the *Musicircus* is essentially Hegelian, wherein a critical antithesis (codes or rules that govern us are bad) is met with an affirmative thesis (the creative potentials of communal love) to produce a visionary synthesis (utopian community) (Junkerman 42). I would argue that while there is some gesture toward a utopian moment in the *Musicircus*, it is far more concerned with the ability to produce communal unintended sounds within this community than it is in envisioning a wider community that mimics the chaos of the *Musicircus*. Junkerman’s own designation of the “happening” as “insubordinate” (40) seems to support my own claims.

has “never had any anti-art attitude whatsoever. I wanted (and still want) to *expand* art to include a good deal of ordinary life, but not to destroy art in any way” (*Art, Performance* 266). Instead, more in keeping with Dick Higgins’s views of Fluxus, allowing artistic practice to include “a good deal of ordinary life” works in tandem with a desire for the quotidian in Fluxus to exist on its own, rather than signifying something larger (i.e. allowing art to exist as analogous to life, rather than as a metaphor for it). As Higgins describes in “A Child’s History of Fluxus,” “[e]verything was itself, it wasn’t part of something bigger or fancier” (87). This understanding of Fluxus lays the groundwork for Mac Low’s conception of art as a practice of embodying and enacting meaning, rather than encoding and decoding messages.

Postulating the artwork as a mediatory experience—one that mediates the perceiver (reader, viewer, even, in Mac Low’s conception, performer) of the art piece and his/her role in the social institutions that govern his/her existence—is not new. Tyrus Miller, in *Singular Examples*, discusses this political role of the poem perceptively. He writes:

Artworks, especially those programmatically designed to expose new formal and experimental possibilities, may not be unitary, static, and punctual vessels of content; rather, they dynamically embody the contradictory and conflictual relations between those people, materials, and contexts shaping their genesis and continuing to play a role in their posterity. (3)

That is to say that developing, for example, a textual experiment that seeks to “expose new formal and experimental possibilities” foregoes control over the text’s content in order to recognize the subjectivity’s inability to control those very social institutions that govern its existence. As such, the form of the text comes to signify this lack of control. “Form, in this view,” Miller goes on to say, “is a weak boundary conditioning the artwork’s relative degree of

control over the social heterogeneity it incorporates” (6). And yet, as the text necessarily functions within generic conventions, the politically anarchist text must navigate between these two poles. As Miller later states in his discussions of Mac Low and Cage’s writings-through of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, “in parallel with their attempts to re-situate the question of the self in the space of language games and textual forms, both Mac Low and Cage come up against a common problem of literary genre” (59). For Mac Low, at least, a way to reconcile this problem is not simply to (politically, anarchically) disrupt authorship by way of formal experiment and chance procedure, but to enjoy (or take pleasure in) this very process.

Mac Low was open about the potential activist or political elements of his work, arguing often that his attempts to disrupt the self in his texts, to produce texts that are “minimally egoic” (Tardos, “Forward” xviii), is an action against the overcoding of subjectivity at the hands of social institutions. For example, in “Poetry and Pleasure,” he writes that “[t]he kinds of pain that people suffer in present day societies are often due to clumsy social, economic, and political arrangements that simply need not be so clumsy, so slovenly” (xxvii). And later, “[s]o many artists and experiencers of art believe that the point of art is to change these slovenly, pain-causing—and boredom-causing—arrangements” (xxviii). But, importantly, he adds, “I do not think this ‘point’ is at odds with pleasure” (xxviii). The pleasure that Mac Low discusses occurs on two levels: first, on the author’s part as initiator and collaborator of/within the text; second, on the reader’s part as performer/enactor of the text. Indeed, much of the enjoyment or pleasure one takes from Mac Low’s work, especially *The Stein Poems* (1998-2003), comes from the level of freedom afforded on both the levels of production and enactment of the text. By subjecting Stein’s work to his own chance operations, Mac Low produces poems that do not fit entirely into syntactic or semantic sense, and yet clearly recall Stein’s work. For example, the first few lines

of the series' first poem, "Little Beginning (Stein 1)," read: "Little lingering father little regular simple. // Little long length there louder happening deepening. / Beginning and little way singing neat cooked." By avoiding the prescriptive overcoding of a syntactical text that demands to be received and interpreted on an exegetical level, that encodes and decodes a message, the text opens itself up to a *jouissance* that could not be available otherwise. Much like Cage's noisy silence, Mac Low's virtual illegibility opens his texts up to variant other readings.

Mac Low also argues that this freedom makes the text more anarchically activist, or, more appropriately, a more effective activist text, because of its ability to act as an analogy of a free community rather than a description of such a community. Also in "Poetry and Pleasure," he writes that it is indeed true, as many political or activist authors have argued, that "speaking differently changes a culture and ... different ways of speaking are most prevalent in poetry" (xxxiii), but he also notes that this process functions both positively and negatively; it can open up potentialities just as easily as it can close them off. For Mac Low, any text that functions politically on a prescriptive level, that instructs its readers about better, more free, ways of living, actually enforces an opposing politic by limiting the reading process. Mac Low's work, in its desire to expose new potentials, functions as an anarchic politic specifically *because* it does not prescribe a change in thought or speech. Rather, it leaves itself open for its perceivers to, in turn, leave themselves more open to these potentialities. In this sense, Mac Low's later work that prioritizes performance as the enacting of meaning rather than the reception of it, functions as a microcosm for anarchism. It produces "a state of society wherein there is no frozen power structure, where all persons may make significant initiatory choices in regard to matters affecting their own lives" ("Statement" 384). It is a turn that gestures toward Mac Low's ideals of a utopian anarchic community, but one that, even he admits, is necessarily imperfect.

Mac Low preferred to think of his work as producing analogies rather than paradigms of anarchic communities. This sentiment comes from an interview with Mac Low published in an issue of the journal *Paper Air* (2.3 1980), which was dedicated entirely to Mac Low studies. In the issue, interviewer Gil Ott poses the question “When one of your works is being performed ... is that a model political community?” (21), and Mac Low’s response is telling. I quote it at length here because he seems to summarize, in his own words, what I have been trying to say about his work, and the work of the other poets in my project for some time:

although performers are not directly regulated by a central authority, eventually they are, since I as the composer am giving them the materials, procedures, rules, etc. (This is why I usually say these days that such performances are ‘analogies’ rather than ‘paradigms’ of free communities). Nevertheless, they’re exercising their own initiative within the situation, the *given* materials being analogies of the real-life conditions provided by nature and society. Within such situations people can be regulated either by central authorities, as in most of the modern world, or by their own spontaneity and initiative. (21)

Reading *The Stein Poems* and enacting their meaning on an individualized but necessarily collaborative level, one is afforded the opportunity to choose, momentarily, to refuse some of the regulatory aspects of a larger system of overcoding; to refuse the clumsy, slovenly categories that limit the initiatory choices we are able to make in our lives; to choose, instead, spontaneity. It’s incomplete and imperfect, but it forces those who encounter Mac Low’s work to realize how and when those choices are made for them.

Reading Cage and Mac Low, But Refusing Exegesis

Considering how involved both Cage and Mac Low were in the artistic-performance

community, it is unsurprising that issues of performance surface in the poetic work of both. However, understanding reading as performance in the Cunningham mesostics is a more simple analogy, as the poems were used quite literally as notations for performance, which I will detail momentarily. *The Stein Poems*, on the other hand, is a series of poems that, save for poetry readings, were not composed with their eventual performance in mind. *The Stein Poems* nevertheless demonstrate that performance is integral to the understanding and experience of Mac Low's work. In them, as in other of Mac Low's asyntactical works, the lines between notation and performance, between a message encoded and a message received, are blurred, and, as such, the experience or perception of *The Stein Poems*, and the meaning-making involved in that perception, amounts to a performance similar to that of the dancers in *The Pronouns* (1964), an earlier composition of Mac Low's in which the poems served as instructions for the dancers' eventual performance. This analogy is, I should add, not at all a stretch, as Mac Low often maintained that much, if not all, of his work after 1954 combined the elements of music, poetry, and theatre into one (*Art, Performance* 257). By envisioning the experience of asyntactical work as the performance of meaning, or what Mac Low himself terms the "enacting" of meaning, *The Stein Poems* break open the processes of exegesis, of meaning-making at the level of the reader. Ultimately, this is a political decision in line with Mac Low's larger poetics and ethics of anarchism and free communal engagement.

Part of Mac Low's poetic goal in his production of asyntactical texts is an interest in the intrinsic significance of all sounds, recalling Cage's silence as a desire for an attentive audience. In "Making Poetry 'Otherwise,'" for example, he asserts that he believes "there's something significant in any sound made by a sentient being." Arguing that, for example, animal noises convey meaning or significance without the vestiges of semantics, without the encoding and

decoding of a linguistic message, Mac Low asserts that the meaning (or meanings) of a sound are intrinsic to, or a part of, the sound itself, directly opposing Ferdinand de Saussure in *Course in General Linguistics* where he famously asserts that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, and that semiotic meaning does not significantly correspond to the visual or aural properties of the signified itself. Mac Low, elsewhere, directly addresses this anti-Saussurian viewpoint when he says:

I believe (despite Saussure and his followers) that there's an intrinsic connection between sound and meaning. ... However, each word has a number of different meanings connected with it, and these multiple meanings may be combined in an infinitely large number of ways, so that perceivers of work such as mine may find (or 'enact') for themselves many different meanings. (*Art, Performance* 257)

What this means is that while some may understand a refusal of Saussurian linguistics, and specifically a refusal of the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, as a gesture towards essentialized meaning, for Mac Low the result is the exact opposite. Instead, understanding that each phoneme, intentional or nonintentional, semantic or otherwise, is the vehicle for infinite possible meanings, opens up the reading process in ways that traditional semiotics does not, or cannot.

Rather than understanding the materiality of language as essentially meaningless, Mac Low revels in the limitless potentials of meaningful sounds. In an interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg, he exclaims, "I am convinced that meaning abounds" (270). In poetry, this places the responsibility of meaning-making not on the poet who composes the piece, but rather on the reader who performs meaning-making at the level of experience or perception. He says:

All words in poems are meaningful, whether they intentionally convey messages

or not and whether they're brought into the poems intentionally or through nonintentional methods. The perceivers of the poems *enact* meanings, at the end of the day, whether the poets intend to convey meanings or not. (271)

This process, he argues, frees language from overcoding, from the weight of the communicative message, allowing the linguistic elements themselves to speak, and freeing the perceiver or reader to engage with or enter into an affective relationship with the piece unburdened by traditional communication. The goal of this writing, then, “is to let what’s there *be*; especially letting words, linguistic units, be, not make them carry a burden of my thoughts, my feelings, whatever” (“Making Poetry” n.p.). What Mac Low proposes here, then, is, in no small terms, a postanarchist reading practice in which expression is refused in favour of a more productive engagement with the text at hand. This view of readership opens up asyntactical texts like those of *The Stein Poems*—but also, in effect, all texts—to the production of infinite unique readings on the part of the reader. “Each person who hears or reads this kind of work produces something new,” he tells Zurbrugg, “whether one wishes to call it ‘meaning’ or something else” (271). The result is a reading practice that is radically communal, radically anarchic.¹¹

I say “anarchic” here because by placing the responsibility of meaning-making on the reader as performer, Mac Low refuses the potential authority of the composer/author role. This has long been a concern of his work, as his widow Anne Tardos recognizes in her forward to

¹¹ Comment by Andy Weaver (29/08/13): “After quoting Mac Low ... you write that ‘The result is a reading practice that is radically communal, radically anarchic.’ Is it communal, though? It seems that it is radically non-hierarchical, and I can certainly agree that it is anarchic, but I’m not convinced about the communal, since the reader is presumably unable to convey her ‘meaning’ or ‘something new’ to other readers. Isn’t this reading practice radically isolated or individualized, rather than communal? Or do you see that reading experience differently?”

Response (30/08/13): “I understand this reading practice as communal insofar as the production of meaning is collaborative (initiator, chance, machine, reader[s]). But, I take your point that this view of meaning is also highly individualized, and necessarily outside of semantic communication. In this sense, each reader/reading is a node in a molecular structure of potential readings.”

Mac Low's selected poems, *Thing of Beauty* (2008), when she quotes the now unavailable "Instructions" for his "Music for Gathas": "[The composer] values freedom—everybody's freedom with this composer-performer community. He [sic] is neither the dictator nor ... the primary soloist" ("Forward" xvi). But, ever the realist, Mac Low never asserts that these moments of free meaning-making are purely anarchic. Rather, the experience of Mac Low's work functions as a Temporary Autonomous Zone, which is what Mac Low himself suggests when he states that the pieces are "'analogies' rather than 'paradigms' of free communities." By creating a TAZ, a performative analogy of an anarchist, free community, Mac Low allows perceivers of his work to recognize how sign systems and their concomitant limitations reinforce the organizing, ruling, and thus inhibiting, effects of larger social institutions, allowing the reader as performer momentary freedom from such limitations. As Miller asserts, "Mac Low mobilizes the difference between sign systems, the paragrammatic-rewriting of a set of written instructions into a set of actions that at once realize and transpose the text, setting in play the text's 'code' while asserting the 'independence' of performers from that code" (74). The "action" of these texts serves as an activism, an opening-up of the choices individuals are able to make, both in the literal performance of pieces like *The Pronouns*, where instructions are vague and open to potentially limitless interpretation, and in the reading-performance of asyntactical pieces like *The Stein Poems*, where exegetical interpretation is revealed as similarly limitless. Mac Low always viewed this allowance of reader-performer choice as an anarchist activism, arguing that

the 'audiences,' as well as the performers, ... exercis[e] many kinds of choice—both perceptive and meaning productive. And this is equally true of readers and hearers of my so-called solo poetry. Most of my work in the arts provides for many types and areas of freedom. And I hope furthers freedom in the world. (*Art*,

Performance 271)

In this way, Mac Low's work invites a postanarchist reading that recognizes how language and deleuzoguattarian overcoding work to limit freedom at the level of the individual.

These elements of *The Stein Poems* are exemplified by "Time That Something Something (Stein 18)," a poem that not only invites and embraces the potentials of multiple meanings, but also relies heavily on aurality (on rhythm, silence, and repetition, elements that Mac Low retained from the Stein source texts). This emphasis on aurality foregrounds the reading of this poem as a performance, and the excessive use of blank space to denote silence, acts as a reminder for the reader to meditate on the potentials of the language therein. The poem begins, following the vague but inviting title, with the following lines, making up the first "sentence":

That

being,

This,

One and one is is,

The.

The juxtaposition of the specificity of the definite articles, "That," "This," and "The," stands in stark contrast to the extremely vague "Something Something" of the title, and the emphasis on the multiple inherent in "One and One is is," which is repeated throughout the poem, identically on line sixty five, as "If is one one" (50), as "One, / and one is, / is one" (77-9), and as "One and one, / is is then there," (118-9). The multiple variations of the line, and its suggestion that the multiple ("one and one") cohere incompletely, reinforce Mac Low's suggestion that the individual linguistic unit carries with it multiple potential readings. On line nineteen, when the line is repeated with an added emphasis on the second "is" (via a stressor accent, recalling Mac

Low's interest in sprung rhythm, and Hopkins's privileging of stressed syllables), the poem reminds its reader that the message, the object of the verb "to be," is not encoded in the poem. That, instead of the burden of syntactical meaning, the poem presents its reader with an emphasized but emptied "is." The rest of the poem is littered with pronouns without antecedents, definite articles without clarifying nouns, progressive verbs without clear acting subjects, and the almost frustrating repetition of vague pronouns such as "something" (27, 28, 42, 43) and "anything" (87, 89, 105). The final four lines of the poem display the potential frustrations of a reader seeking expression, unaware that the poem requires that s/he take the role of meaning-maker in the text. It ends:

Talking,
 seeing,
 expressing,
 discovering something something. (142-5)

While the reader may hope to interpret and thus "discover" something previously "covered" by the text, s/he is met with illogic and anticlimax. As the implied acting subject of these progressive verbs, the reader fills in the emptiness of the words, accepts the potentials of their meaning, and as such, performs the piece. S/he enacts something something.

Cage approaches the role of the reader in the production of meaning in a similar fashion. In order to discuss how this process occurs in the Cunningham mesostics, I should first take a moment to discuss the poems themselves. "62 Mesostics re Merce Cunningham" is made up of sixty-two mesostic poems (a mesostic is like an acrostic poem, but where the spine is in the centre rather than left-aligned) that repeat Cage's partner's first and last names throughout. The poems were produced, as Cage outlines in his "Foreword" to *M: Writings '67 – '72*, by

subjecting selections Cunningham's own book, *Changes: Notes on Choreography*, and "from thirty-two other books most used by Cunningham in relation to his work" to *I Ching* chance operations (ii). As such, the results are illegible (or, perhaps better, unintelligible) poems constituted by nonce or nonsensical words arranged according to the name-spine, as seen in the first poem of the sequence (see fig. 1). While some words contained in the poem are fairly clearly legible (lines three through seven read, for example, "once / in / premise / on," lines nine and ten read "short / stead"), they in no way form cohesive

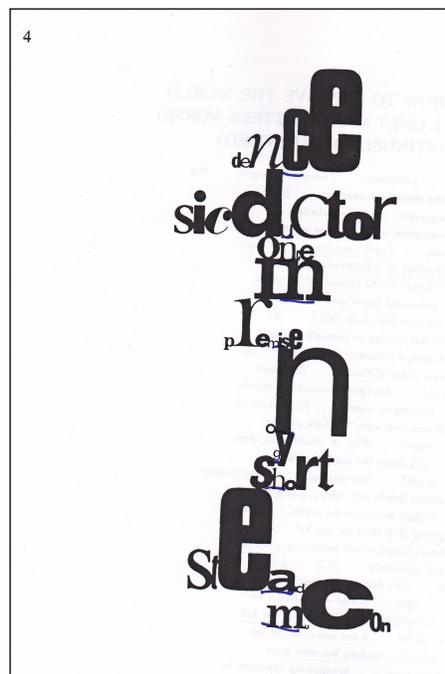


Figure 1
John Cage. "Mesostic 1." *M* (4)

sentences, or even phrases. The text is readable, but nonsensical. The few scholarly discussions of the poems, such as in Andy Weaver's "Writing through Merce: John Cage's Silence, Differends, and Avant-Garde Idioms," and Sean Braune's "Cage's Mesostics and Saussure's Paragrams as Love Letters," attempt to read or to interpret the poems in pieces. All three of us note the semantic complications, but, nonetheless, our attempts to read intimacy or love into the poems, however "protosemantic," court exegesis in a poetic sequence that repeatedly reminds us that this process is doomed to fail. The Cunningham mesostic sequence is, above all else, a metapoetic series that rails against exegesis, against hermeneutics in general, and against the inherent overcoding of semantic language. The poems seek pure communication (repeating my turn to the heart of the term, the *comunis* or *communal*), rather than a limited expression based on militarized language.

Weaver elsewhere labels another of Cage's mesostic sequences, "Writing for a Second

Time Through Finnegans Wake,” a “text of noise, not of communication (in terms of communication theory). As far as meaning goes, a text that is all noise is basically nonsense, or non-communicative—and therefore silent” (*Indeterminacy* 160). I would argue here, instead, that the Cunningham mesostics do indeed communicate, but rather more like a virus (to borrow from Dworkin’s metaphor that will follow) than a coded semantic message. Inviting its reader into a *comunis*, a communicative field, the sequence brings its constitutive words to the very edge of semantics, and conveys, instead of sense, affect. Instead of quantitative meaning, qualitative intensity.¹² This is an easy observation to make, perhaps, but a much more difficult one to explain. Dworkin makes the same concession in his own discussions of noise and communication in Howe:

Even critical and scholarly work that pays close attention to the disruptive possibilities of [noise] runs the risk of neutralizing the very disruptive potential it identifies. Such work must try to avoid co-opting those disruptions for its own rhetorical ends, and might instead attempt to communicate noise in the way one might communicate a disease. . . . This chapter, indeed this entire book—is itself a prime example of the way in which noises get accepted into the system, get inside us, become, in short, *les parasites*: infecting, spreading, and disabling, but also structuring, adapting, mutating, mimicking, colonizing. (49)

As such, attempting an exegetical reading of Cage’s linguistic noise betrays the goal of a postanarchist literary theory. Instead, the work invites us as readers to be attentive rather than

¹² I use this term much in the same way Brian Massumi uses it in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. He writes: “Intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state, and one that is static—temporal and narrative noise. It is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption” (26).

interpretive readers.¹³

Attention to noise (be it disruptive noise, background noise, semantic noise, white noise, etc.) has long been a major feature of Cage's work musically. He makes this much clear in his "The Future of Music: Credo," collected in *Silence* (1967), when he writes: "Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating" (54). Cage's decision, then, to incorporate noise into his compositions is a political one that seeks to defamiliarize our relationship with noise, as it allows his audience to pay particular attention to those sounds that make up music.¹⁴ Despite his phrasing in the lines quoted above, this use of noise in composition is indeed disturbing—it disturbs the status quo of musical

¹³ Comment by Andy Weaver (19/08/13): "While I take your point about avoiding exegetical readings of the '62 Mesostics,' do Cage's comments about the sequence in his introduction invite or privilege certain readings?"

Response (20/08/13): "I have been thinking a lot about how these descriptions of the indeterminate or chance produced texts by the author necessarily shape/limit potential readings. In Jackson Mac Low's work, for example, he places a good deal of privilege on these procedural descriptions. Cage is somewhat less interested in guiding the reading process in that way. On the one hand, these descriptions emphasize process over end-product, and that is positive and postanarchist. But, they also close off potential readings so long as we understand them as external markers guiding textual readings. Poetics, such as Cage's forward, can actually open up potential readings, though, as long as the reader always understands them as doors to new available readings rather than skeleton keys that unlock exegetical secrets. A task easier said than done, to be sure, but one that move reading away from a hermeneutical privileging of authorial intent. It's tricky, but when Cage tells us he failed but liked the poems regardless, he's urging us to note process without looking for the answers it may provide."

Comment by Andy Weaver (21/08/13): "Poetics as a proliferation of possible meanings? That's an interesting idea. I suppose it depends on who is writing the poetics?"

Response (22/08/13): "Definitely true. Marinetti's poetics, for example, close off his poetry (and make it morally difficult, too). But, Marinetti's work and the mandates of Futurism are really instructions. I still firmly believe (and perhaps this is my own preference at play) that the poetics of the vast majority of the authors in my project open up their poetics rather than limit them."

¹⁴ Comment by Andy Weaver (19/08/13): "You write that 'Cage's decision, then, to incorporate noise into his compositions is a political one that seeks to defamiliarize our relationship with noise, as it allows his audience to pay particular attention to those sounds that make up music.' How is this decision 'political'? Is there a dismantling of hierarchies at work?"

Response (20/08/13): "Certainly, Cage's defamiliarization of noise is political in that it breaks down hierarchies of what is and is not music (art, poetry, meaningful, etc). It also disrupts the hierarchical relationship between author/reader, composition/situation, text/interpretation. And it also, in a sense, seeks to disrupt a hegemony of subjectivity: if all noise is always already music, the listener must then interrogate how social institutions have put in place the same limiting processes of naming and designating."

composition; of our expectations of what a musical piece should and should not include; of our understandings of compositional organization.¹⁵ This noise translates to linguistic (rather than semantic) noise in the Cunningham mesostics in part as a result of the visual form of the poems, wherein each letter is given a unique font and size, which at times obscures the letters themselves. Additionally, as Cage himself notes in an instalment of his “Diary” series of poems, “Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse) Continued 1970-71,” this emphasis on each letter invites the reader into a particularly attentive reading process:

To raise language’s
temperature we not only remove syntax: we
give each letter undivided attention,
setting it in unique face and size;
to read becomes the verb to sing. (107)

In this attentive reading process, the reader is invited into affective relationships with the words, letters, phonemes, and morphemes that make up the mesostics. In a sense, then, the poems become notations for a reading public,¹⁶ who perform the piece (who “sing” it) as they read. For Cage, this division of text as notation and reading as performance is one that adds an additional

¹⁵ I will admit that Cage seems particularly uninterested in redefining music in order to allow for the inclusion of these sounds. In “The Future of Music: Credo” he writes: “If this word, music, is sacred and reserved for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century instruments, we can substitute a more meaningful term: organization of sound” (55). This said, in his earlier percussive work, Cage had a stronger interest in redefining the musical field, as evident in Pence James’s “People Call it Noise – But He Calls in Music” (a review of a percussion concert composed and delivered by Cage and others in 1942), wherein Cage is quoted in saying that his music was not an “end in itself, but we are trying to make all the field of audible sound available for music” (62). In his later work, however, Cage seems much happier to have the audience/reader focus his/her attention, than to dismantle the categorical structures that govern the genre-placement of his work.

¹⁶ I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention here that the poems also literally serve as notation, and are performed as a musical piece for solo voice, famously performed by Demetrio Stratos, and later by Eberhard Blum. The performance of the piece uses the size and font of the letters to denote volume, tone, and length of each letter’s pronunciation, thereby enforcing an affective reading of the text.

level of chance or indeterminacy in the production of textual meaning. That is, “[c]omposition becomes distinct from performance. One cannot determine exactly what effect the notation causes—thus, indeterminacy” (“Form is a Language” 135). So, the chance-determined form of the poem¹⁷ plays a role in the chance-determined affective meaning of the text for its readership that is similar to the unbiased coin-toss of the *I Ching* chance operation. The various-sized letters perform their noise-function, disturbing exegetical or interpretive reading habits, but remaining fascinating all the while.

“Inging” is Cage’s endearing neologism that appears in “Mesostic 19” (*M* 82, see fig. 2). While semantically nonsensical—there is, of course, no *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for “inging”—the word functions in Cage’s context as a sort of *urverb*, that implies something like perpetual *doing*, on the one hand, and on the other, a pure linguistic transience, a *mis en abime* verb that folds in on itself, repeats itself, means itself. A feedback-loop of noise. Repetition is one means of robbing a signifier of its semantic meaning; a word gets repeated so many times that the Saussurian arbitrary relationship between signifier and

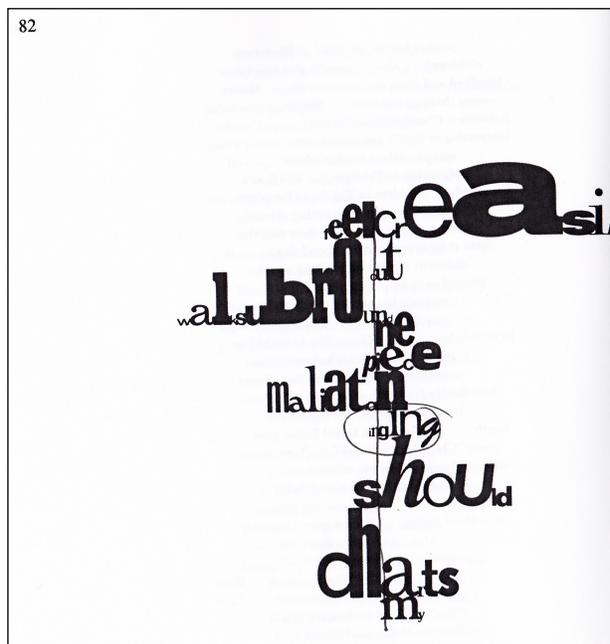


Figure 3
John Cage. “Mesostic 19.” *M* (82)

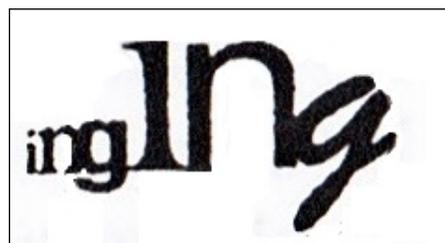


Figure 2
John Cage. “Mesostic 19 (detail).”
M (82)

¹⁷ From the “Forward” to *M*: “I used over seven hundred different type faces and sizes available in Letraset and, of course, subjected them to *I Ching* chance operations” (ii).

signified gets pulled apart. “Inging” is indefinite repetition. It sits in the mesostic as a fulcrum: towards the centre of Cunningham’s name, the first “g” holds it in place. The letters themselves increase in size (see fig. 3); the first “ing” is much smaller than the second, suggesting that the noise of “inging” gets louder, more disturbing, as it continues. Interestingly, the final “g” is written in a cursive font (the only cursive on the page), connoting both interconnectivity between letters and an expected continuation. The lack of another letter after the final “g” suggests emptiness, invites a rereading of the word. This is especially striking in light of the sheer size of other letters in the poem; the “ea” in the first line, the “bro” in the third, the “hou” in eight, and what appears to be an overlapping “d” and “h” on line nine, are all enormous, demanding the reader’s attention away from the blank space, and the otherwise unassuming “inging.” I leave you my own pen-marks. I want you to pay attention.

The Role of the Author in Mac Low and Cage

As I have suggested, there is a dearth of scholarship on the Cunningham mesostics, with the exception of the recently published articles by Weaver and Braune. The only author to give more attention than a few sentences to the Cunningham mesostics is Cage’s fellow poet Jackson Mac Low, who writes of this sequence, albeit still quite briefly, in “Something about the Writings of John Cage,” and its later, heavily revised version, “Cage’s Writings up to the Late 1980s.”¹⁸ Mac Low describes the poems as Cage’s first foray into “writing *asyntactical*

¹⁸ Most texts make only brief reference to the sequence: Peter Dickinson’s volume, *Cagetalk*, mentions the Cunningham sequence only once, and this in passing, as part of a list of concerts involving half of Cage’s work, and half of the composer David Tudor (186). Richard Kostelanetz’s collection of interview excerpts makes only one reference to these mesostics, and then only as a performance piece (Kostelanetz 171). Where more than a passing reference is made, discussions of these poems tend to remain very much limited to Cage’s own discussion in the foreword to *M*. For example, James Pritchett’s *The Music of John Cage*, notes that this sequence acts as a “precursor to [his writing-through] method, with its words drawn at random from Cunningham’s writings and other books” (178). Pritchett revisits the sequence a few pages later, only to refer to what Cage notes about the chance-operations he used to decide the sequence’s idiosyncratic typefaces, and to quote Cage’s argument that the poems look like “waterfalls” or “ideograms” (Pritchett 182-3). Even David Revill’s celebrated biography of Cage, *The Roaring*

mesostics, employing *I Ching* chance operations, and ‘writing-through’ methods” (“Something” 289). In its first incarnation, Mac Low’s essay moves from this statement to a lengthy quotation from the foreword to *M*, culminating, as references to the mesostics are wont to do, in Cage’s statement that the poems looked like “waterfalls or ideograms,” which is followed by a note about their eventual performance (289-90). In its later revision, however, the essay moves from this sequence to other, often earlier, poems by Cage which are also “asyntactical,” most notably “Mureau,” which is also collected in *M*. Mac Low then returns to the Cunningham mesostics to use the same lengthy quotation as the earlier version, ending again with the reference to “waterfalls” and “ideograms” (“Cage’s Writing” 215-220).

This minimal discussion of the Cunningham mesostics in Cage scholarship is especially significant because what little scholarship exists tends to be preoccupied with Cage’s own explanation of the sequence. This shift from analysis of the text to analysis of an author’s explanation marks an important facet of the scholarship on Cage, specifically that as the poems become indeterminate, largely illegible, and interested almost completely in form, the scholarship moves away from the poems themselves, and towards the poetics. One justification for this shift might be that by studying Cage’s poetics rather than studying the poems themselves as end results, the focus of the scholarship shifts from product to process, and this would be a shift in line with Cage’s poetics more generally. This emphasis on production is important. But as criticism moves away from the texts at hand, and focuses instead on the work of the author’s production of the text, these examples reify the writer and his process, which runs counter to Cage’s work more general, and is counterproductive to a postanarchist reading practice. A

Silence, fails to discuss these mesostics in any more depth than Cage’s foreword (234-235), and completely shies away from making any connections between the mesostics and Cage’s relationship to Cunningham, in an almost New Critical aversion to reading the author’s life into his work.

postanarchist methodology for reading these mesostics looks to authorship in the poems as an integral part of the text and invites readers to take part in that very process as they read.

As I have previously indicated, a discussion of authorship in the Cunningham mesostics is extremely difficult, and must be at the very least tentative, because, in the conventional sense, Cage has not written these poems. In terms of content, the “syllables and words” found in the poem were, as Cage writes in the foreword, “obtained from Merce Cunningham’s *Changes: Notes on Choreography* and from thirty-two other books most used by Cunningham in relation to his work” (ii). The order in which the words appear was decided, not by poetic diction, but by chance. The source texts were subjected to *I Ching* chance operations, “a process which brought about in some cases syllable exchange between two or more of them” (“Foreword” ii). The form of the poems is also outside of Cage’s control to some degree. While Cage decided on the mesostic form, and on Cunningham’s name as the poems’ “spines,” the poems are composed in “over seven hundred different type faces and sizes available in Letraset and, of course, subjected ... to *I Ching* chance operations” (“Foreword” ii). In this deference to chance and indeterminacy, the image of the author, even in abstract or experimental art, gets critically complicated. There is little correlation between Cage subjecting Cunningham’s books, and later Letraset typefaces, to chance operations and the more traditional notions of poetic production (*sprezzatura*, Romantic inspiration, etc.).

However, it would be inaccurate to claim that Cage’s use of the *I Ching*, or of chance more generally, was designed to eradicate the role of the author. While chance is certainly one of the most often studied aspects of Cage’s work, it is also, as Constance Lewallen writes in “Cage and the Structure of Chance,” the most often misunderstood: “misunderstood because it is often mistakenly believed that Cage used chance to avoid making choices” (235). Of course, Cage

made many choices in the production of the Cunningham mesostics, not only selecting the source texts but selecting them based on the intimately personal criteria of those “books most used by Cunningham.” In this way, Cage’s use of chance is not a way to avoid making decisions about the poems he is writing, but rather a way to change the kind of choices the author makes. In this sense, he “use[s] chance as a discipline ... to circumvent personal taste and memory so that he would be more open to outside experiences” (Lewallen 236). Cage identifies this misunderstanding himself in an interview when he says, “Most people who believe that I’m interested in chance don’t realize that I use chance as a discipline. They think I use it—I don’t know—as a way of giving up making choices. But my choices consist in choosing what questions to ask” (Kostelanetz 17). In this way, Cage’s role as author of these poems becomes destabilized. Instead, the poems are written by a sort of collective involving Cage, who asks the questions, and Cunningham, whose work dictated the source texts Cage would choose from, and which books he ultimately chose, but also including the *I Ching* and the Letraset typefaces, all working in tandem. Additionally, the authors of the source texts play a role in this collaboration, albeit without their consent or awareness. Most importantly, a postanarchist reading of the poems includes the reader in this collaborative view of the poems’ production. As the reader enters in the comunis of communication with the texts, and takes value

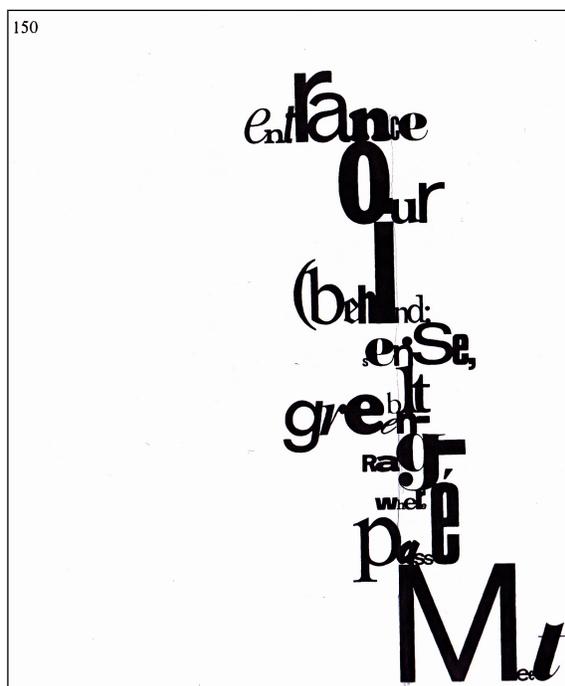


Figure 4
John Cage. “Mesostic 44.” *M* (150).

from the intensities of the noise produced in the ansyntactical poems, s/he engages in this production in a manner that Cage as author can neither control nor predict.

Indeterminacy notwithstanding, the poems themselves seem to advocate this communal authorship, with repeated references to collection and combination: “mix” (23), “crossing” (29) and “cross” (154), “sum” (39), “inter” (136), “series” (139), “between” (148), and an especially significant “we” twice (9, 71). At times, the words themselves even intermingle due to the varying sizes of the characters, making it difficult to separate characters from each other, or tell which letter belongs to which “word.” For example, the “h” “i” and “n” in the word “(behind” in one poem (see fig. 4) blend so that there is no space on either side of the “i” (150). Further down this poem, a “g” is so attached to a hyphen and a comma that the three appear to make one unique character together. In the poem just following this, an enormous “o” takes up two full lines, and it would be unclear which line the “o” was meant to start were it not for the fact that both lines consist of actual English words: “people” and “other” (151). In this way, form and content work to support a collaborative authorship that destabilizes the traditional understanding of the expressive self as artist.

Perhaps the most important element of the writing of the Cunningham mesostics, one that necessarily influences the poems themselves, is that of ease and practicality. These issues of practicality are not often discussed in terms of Cage’s work, despite their importance. The romantic, anarchic, and experimental reasons why Cage would structure his poems in this way, are certainly more seductive, but the practical elements that inform these decisions are worth noting, especially because they provide additional readings to a work that already provokes multifarious readings. I am speaking here specifically about the critical issue of the length of Cunningham’s name. Cage gestures towards this issue himself in the foreword to *M*. According

to his account, he initially “tried to write syntactically as [he] had in the case of the *Mesostics Re and Not Re Marcel Duchamp*, but the length of Cunningham’s name proved an obstacle” (i). Instead, he writes the poems using chance operations, and avoids syntax altogether. Moreover, the decision to have the letters touch, which I have read as a poetic decision throughout my work, was also made out of practicality, wherein Cage could turn the length of Cunningham’s name “from obstacle to utility” (“Foreword” i). Discussing the practicality in this way, and especially in using the term “utility,” Cage brings the focus away from purely poetic readings, and forces the reader to engage in the production of the poems on a real, material level.

It is perhaps not very interesting, even potentially mundane, to note such practicalities, but the issue of the length of Cunningham’s name is of great importance to any study of the work, and more generally, the issue of practicality is very important for Cage’s poetics. In fact, when asked in an interview what his “greatest legacy to future generations” would be, Cage replied in his characteristically axiomatic way: “Having shown the practicality of making works of art nonintentionally” (Kostelanetz 26). In view of the painstaking, laborious process of subjecting so many books to *I Ching* operations, and then subjecting each letter in the poem to these operations to decide the typeface, the idea that this manner of “making works of art” is practical seems improbable. But, the practicality here is not in the production of the poems so much as in the poems that are produced, and how these poems could come to be read. In this way, Cage has succeeded in the creation of a poem that is practical, easy to read (in the sense that there is no singular but hidden interpretation), and indefinite in the reading processes it evokes. Without the power over both reader and writer innate in expression (however abstract), the militarized language of syntax, or even the limitations of pre-existing words, Cage creates a poem that is indefinitely multiple in the ways it can be read and, perhaps even more importantly,

by whom. The goal of creating literature that can be read by anyone (although he remains unclear about who “anyone” would entail) seems to have been a preoccupation of his. As Cage says in an interview in 1971, the same year the Cunningham mesostics were first published: “I am hoping to find a language in which people can read in their own way, no matter where they come from” (Kostelanetz 143).

In terms of a refusal of exegesis and this interest in practicality, the Cunningham mesostics mark an important starting point for Cage’s indeterminate, or chance-produced, poetry. They are, as Mac Low asserts in the passage quoted above, the point at which Cage “*began to write ‘asyntactical’ mesostics*” (“Cage’s Writings” 220, *emph. mine*). They thus serve as an important jumping-off-point for a postanarchist discussion of the relationship between indeterminate poetics and authorship. Moving to Mac Low’s own work, my focus shifts, and I begin here not with Mac Low’s early poems in which he pushes the limits of chance, spontaneity, improvisation, deterministic methods, and computer systems designed to produce diastic¹⁹ poems, but with his poetic sequence *The Stein Poems*, composed between 1998 to 2003, ending just a year before Mac Low’s death. Among some of the last poems Mac Low ever wrote, *The Stein Poems* serve as a kind of combination²⁰ of a lifetime of experimentation with

¹⁹ The term “diastic” refers to a paragrammatic procedure Mac Low developed in order to produce deterministic poems. In a diastic poem, a source text is selected (sometimes at random), and then a seed text is used to select certain words from the source text. Words are selected based on the placement of the letters, so the first letter of the first word of the seed text is used to find a word in the source text with the same letter at the start of the word. Subsequently, the second word is chosen provided it has the second letter of the seed text in its own second-letter-position. “Stein 72,” for example, uses as its source text, Part I, Stanza VI of Gertrude Stein’s “Stanzas in Meditation.” Its seed text is Mac Low’s son, Mordecai-Mark’s, name. The poem reads: “more not more to-day forget.” The poem ends here because the system was unable to find a word after “forget” in which the “e” was in the fifth position (*Thing of Beauty* 401).

²⁰ Comment by Michael O’Driscoll (23/08/13): “I think that the nuancing of JML’s deterministic methods that accounts for the tensions he so deliberately developed between choice and chance is an important and more recent component of our understanding of his diverse body of work. The Stein poems seem an excellent locus for such considerations. However, rather than framing them as return or culmination, it might be more productive to give some thought to how this series “broadens the medium” of language (to paraphrase Bernstein) in the way that

indeterminacy and chance. As Mac Low himself asserted in a cover-letter sent accompanying a submission of some of these poems for journal publication: “I returned to using a deterministic procedure in April 1998, when I began writing the poems in the Stein series, but now I always, to some extent, modify the results of the procedure, making personal decisions of different kinds. My writingways [sic] came together” (*Thing of Beauty* 376). In *The Stein Poems*, Mac Low returns to deterministic methods of writing, which he had more or less abandoned, only to adapt these chance-based procedures by making clear (and unapologetic) the moments in which his individual taste intervened in, or added onto, the deterministic process. Importantly, it would seem from his publication history that his writings about and discussions of Cage’s chance-based work had a direct influence on the decision to produce *The Stein Poems* in this fashion.

Published in Richard Kostelanetz’s 1993 *Writings about John Cage*, Mac Low’s article “Something About the Writings of John Cage,” examined, specifically and critically, the role of taste and authorial intent in Cage’s chance-based work. He then revised and expanded the article as “Cage’s Writings up to the Late 1980s” for inclusion in David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch’s *Writings Through John Cage’s Music, Poetry, + Art* in 2001. At the same time, he was engaged in the composition of *154 Forties*, poems written in a more traditional compositional method, incorporating an emphasis on prosody (specifically on stressed syllables, again recalling

captured JML’s attention when he discovered new procedural methods. JML never left anything behind, but I also don’t think he would have thought of any one method as summary. In other words, what do the Stein poems achieve or open on to that furthers our understanding of his work? What is singular about their contribution to his corpus?”

Response (27/08/13): “Yes, regarding *The Stein Poems* as ‘culmination’ is unhelpful. Anne Tardos, in the forward to *Thing of Beauty*, calls it a ‘combination of ways’ (xxii), which is maybe more open to the broadening to which you’re referring. And it also helps to capture the ‘coming together’ Mac Low suggests in the cover letter that accompanied some of these poems. I’ll change the language I use in this entry when I revise. I think that this ‘coming together’ or ‘combination’ is a part of what makes these poems important, especially in light of the other retro-avant-garde pieces Mac Low produced (for Schwitters, for Pound, for Woolf, for Dickinson). While less elegiac than either the Schwitters or the Pound sequences, and less an exercise in diastic experiment than the Woolf or Dickinson poems, *The Stein Poems* seem to occupy a mediatory space, not necessarily tied to any one element of Mac Low’s general poetics.”

Hopkins's "sprung rhythm") and caesural spaces. In 1998, between the two Cage articles, Mac Low, as he stated in the quotation above, "returned" to deterministic methods, but under the caveat that he no longer pretended that this was not ultimately an egoic or ego-centric process. This decision was clearly triggered, at least in part, by Mac Low's work on Cage, in which he rails against those who misinterpreted or misunderstood Cage as having refused or eliminated the presence of the ego and its concomitant authorial intent via indeterminacy. For Cage, Mac Low writes, "[c]hance was always constrained, to a greater or lesser extent, by his intentions" ("Cage's Writings" 231), and later: "He knew very well that if he did anything at all, it would be done by or through his ego" (232). For Mac Low, the complete removal of the ego, of the Author, was impossible. He maintains in his work on Cage that the absolute refusal of the individual ego in a chance-based text was not only impossible, it was also not the goal of such work. "The point is not whether [Cage] ever entirely evaded his individual ego and its predilections," he writes, "but that he diminished to some extent the value-judging activity of the ego that excludes possibilities, and that he thereby let in, to some extent, 'the rest of creation'" ("Cage's Writings" 227).

To be sure, Mac Low was, at least in part, aware of the egoism involved in chance-based and deterministic writing methods. In his two seminal poetics pieces, "Statement" and "Some Remarks to the Dancers," both collected in the highly influential *The Poetics of the New American Poetry* in 1973, he touches briefly on the role of choice in chance-based texts. In "Statement," he asserts that the author is not a dictator over a text, but rather a co-initiator of action, and is thus encouraged to produce, even (or especially) by means outside of his/her control, "absolutely unique situations" (385). In "Some Remarks to the Dancers" he notes that although his acclaimed sequence *The Pronouns: A Collection of 40 Dances for the Dancers* used

“chance” to create the poems, by way of a filing card system he devised, some “crucial features” were matters of free choice (390-1). While these brief pieces demonstrate that, even in 1973, Mac Low had begun to think about the relationship between chance and authorship, it wasn’t until after Cage’s death in 1992, and his subsequent work on Cage’s use of chance, that Mac Low was able to re-evaluate his views on indeterminacy. This is demonstrated most clearly in “Making Poetry ‘Otherwise,’” when he asserts “that the choices [Cage] and many of us made when we devised systems would be egoist in the very absolute Zen sense” (n.p.).

The Stein Poems, then, stand at a mediatory position between chance and choice, between nonintentional and intentional writing.²¹ Mac Low’s discussions of authorship in Cage’s chance-produced texts forced him to re-evaluate what precisely constitutes a nonintentional text, or a deterministically produced text, asserting that the two terms are actually quite different. He notes that, sparked by a discussion with his son, he realized that though his systemic reading-through text-selection procedures were “nonintentional”—“in that [he] cannot predict to any extent what will be brought into a text through using them” (“Cage’s Writings” 224)—they are also “deterministic” in that “[i]f followed out to the letter, they must find, and bring into the work being written, the same linguistic units in the source texts each time” (225). The element of chance, of the indeterminate, is further a third term, represented in the procedures by way of “human errors (and when these methods are automated, computer errors),” which “provide an unlooked-for but inevitable element of chance” (225). While the author has relative control over the procedures, as co-initiator of their actions (to use Mac Low’s own terms), and while this process is, as Mac Low asserts, necessarily born out of the ego, it also at the same time works to destabilize the position of the writing subject. Akin to the excess of meaning produced by noise,

²¹ From “Cage’s Writing up to the Late 1980s”: “Procedures operating from *any* level of the ego, in the Zen sense, I call ‘intentional’; ‘nonintentional’ refers only to those procedures that do not do so” (226).

the many elements of authorship innate in Mac Low's deterministic/unintentional methods produce an excess of authorship. It is this excess that he refers to, but seems unable to define, when he writes, "You realize that making a chance system is as egoic, in some ways, or even as emotional, as writing a poem spontaneously. But at the same time you realize there *is* something more than just yourself doing it" ("The Poetics of Chance" 175). That "something more" is, at least in part, an anarchic politics of communality and the need to defamiliarize subjectivity.

As Miller observes in *Singular Examples*, Mac Low's work looks to destabilize subjectivity, especially those ways in which subjectivity is defined and solidified in/through language. Miller argues that by accepting the inability of a text to be completely devoid of ego, of an Author, Mac Low gives his work the unique opportunity to expand the field of play of authorship within and outside of chance-based methods. This is to say that, for Miller,

the different instances of the subject in language (grammatical, intentional, incarnational) are still operative, in part at least, in Mac Low's acrostic-chance poems, but relate to one another asymmetrically, making the hypostasis of a single thinking/ speaking/ acting self impossible. (51)

To put this more succinctly, in his discussions of Mac Low's *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*, poems composed in 1960 and identified by Mac Low as his "first deterministic yet nonintentional system" (*Thing of Beauty* 49), Miller asserts that "[t]he self is not so much absent from this text as it is ascetically chastened" (61). While necessarily politically charged, Mac Low's decision to disrupt authorship in this fashion is also aesthetic. In "Making Poetry 'Otherwise,'" he asserts that in his early deterministic methods, he "felt that whatever was given should be accepted." As such, he notes that his later nondeterministic writings, such as *154 Forties*, and the merging of these two ways of writing in *The Stein Poems* demonstrate "a real change" in which he "started

thinking that what was made by the systems was not necessarily better.” Mac Low’s intentional interventions in the systemic text-producing processes mark his own desire to make the products of these systems “better.”²²

This notion of betterment is intrinsically tied to Mac Low’s eventual decision that there can be no writing truly outside of sense (semantics, syntax). This is best demonstrated, too, in his writings on Cage, in which he takes Cage to task for his use of the term “nonsyntactical.” Mac Low asserts that Cage sought to free language from conventional, normative syntax, “freed from ‘the arrangements of an army,’ which Norman O. Brown told [Cage] was the original meaning of ‘syntax,’ derived from the Greek σύνταξις [syntaksis]” (“Cage’s Writings” 212). Mac Low himself preferred the term “asyntactical.” He writes, “[t]here is some question, of course, as to whether any arrangement of language elements, no matter how different from normative syntax, doesn’t in itself constitute a new, non-normative syntax. (For this reason I never use Cage’s term ‘nonsyntactical.’)” (212). Similarly, Mac Low came to believe that there was no such thing as

²² Comment by Andy Weaver (23/08/13): “I wonder if Mac Low’s edited/‘better’ deterministic poems are very different from Cage’s many ‘writing through’ works, most of which he explicitly altered after using chance/deterministic procedures to develop a text from which he would remove words as he liked—are Cage and Mac Low really that far apart at these moments? Is the most important difference Mac Low’s greater emphasis on and specificity about his interventions? I guess what I’m asking is, is the difference here more a matter of degree than of kind?”

Response (27/08/13): “On the difference between Mac Low’s interventions and Cage’s, this is an interesting intersection between the two. Certainly as I oppose them, I recognize that this division is academic, and that there are multiple important shared concerns between them. I agree that part of the difference here is degree, because Mac Low certainly engages more often, more freely, and more significantly, with the outputs of his systems. He also talks about it more candidly than Cage (this is something that should, and will, be cited in a later revision). But I also think that the two authors approach these moments of personal taste/choice in different ways. While Cage terms these moments ‘interventions,’ as you have, or moments of ‘cleaning’ or ‘organizing’ the results to fit an end-goal, Mac Low instead uses terms like ‘mining,’ which I’ve quoted above, or, more tellingly, ‘interacting with the products of non intentional systems’ (*Art, Performance* 268). Additionally, he remarks further down that interview that he thinks he most often edits more thoroughly in computer-generated texts because he feels as though the work was all done for him. All of this is a long-winded way of saying that I think there is, if minute, still a difference in the ways in which Cage and Mac Low alter the products of their indeterminate systems. Mac Low sees himself as entering into a sort of delezoguattarian assemblage with the text, the machine, the source/seed texts, &c. Cage, instead, is a sort of poetic butcher, trimming away excess fats, and cutting out the right sizes and shapes of poem-flesh. (From one vegetarian to another, I’m sorry that comment went that way).”

complete randomness, especially not in deterministic or computer-based systems of textual production: “There’s no randomness if it’s computer generated. ... No, I never like randomness. I want specific things” (“Making Poetry” n.p.). Accepting finally that a nonsyntactical, entirely random, and authorless text was a clear impossibility, Mac Low produced *The Stein Poems* as a culmination of a lifetime of experimentation with all three terms.

It is for this reason that the brief explanatory endnotes included after each poem in the *Stein* series includes, for the most part, detailed accounts of how he altered or played with the products of the systemic procedures. Ranging in level of intervention, some poems, such as “And One That Clear (Stein 15)” get “accepted” as they are produced (*Thing of Beauty* 382). “Stein 11-13” are included, each with “minimal subsequent editing” (379-81). “Pleasant to be Repeating Very Little of This (Stein 32)” is published after having been “revised a number of times” (397). And, “Be Gentle to a Greek (Stein 53)” gets included after having been “freely revised and edited” (400). Additionally, some of the explanatory notes are extremely vague, but suggest a good deal of editing, revision, and clear authorial intention, such as the note that follows “Something Important Could Certainly Be Enough (Stein 76),” wherein Mac Low writes that the poem was produced by “‘mining’ what remained of the output of this procedure and producing normative sentences from the words elicited thereby” (402). These late poems, and their explanatory notes, are thus invitations to a postanarchist reading practice that engages with the one proposed by Cage’s Cunningham mesostics, but also deviates from it dramatically.

If the primary concern of the Cunningham mesostics, then, is to engage the reader not in narrative or even logical sense, but rather in a comunitas of acute attention to language, then this raises a number of questions: what is the purpose of such a poem, if not to communicate a message? and, if Cage refuses communication or engagement with his readers, is this not akin to

holding these readers in contempt, or distrust, or both? These are the questions I am most frequently asked about Cage's work by those who lack a familiarity with Cage or with the avant-garde in general (my mother asks these questions most often, in a sometimes confrontational, but always legitimately curious, manner). But, surprisingly, I almost never deal with these issues in my work, and have very rarely seen these issues approached in other scholarship. When my mother asks for the purpose of the text like the Cunningham mesostics, it is often followed by the oft-used retort to experimental texts: "anyone could do that" or, perhaps more strikingly, "even *I* could do that." This charge was laid against Cage's work most often in his earlier years, when the apparent shock-value of his work was becoming publicized, and when his work was garnering public attention alongside the rising popularity of the other artists in the New York School. Responding precisely to these concerns, and anticipating my mother's confusion, Jill Johnston, in her contemporaneous review of *Silence*, writes:

What is the point of making anything at all, since at any moment the world is teeming with possibilities for experience? For Cage, the answer is that there is no point, it is simply something to do, which means that living and making a thing are not two separate acts. And if everybody can do it, then let everybody. (148)

For some, I suppose that Johnston's rationale for Cage here would be unsatisfying: a lack of purpose is not wholly addressed by saying "who needs a purpose"? But her observations are in kind with Cage's own recorded ideas about his work. He often shied away from addressing purpose in interviews, maintaining instead that "Emptiness of purpose does not imply contempt for society, rather assumes that each person, whether he [sic] knows it or not is noble, is able to experience gifts with generosity, that society is best anarchic" ("Form is a Language" 135).

An "emptiness of purpose," then, is Cage's egalitarian breaking language down to its

constituent parts, and to refuse what he views as a capitalist, consumerist understanding of language (when militarized) as purposeful, as useful. These mesostics are gifts in a gift-economy of artistic practice, where each page as place is privileged equally. It is this view of art that Cage affirms in his mesostic “Overpopulation and Art,” when he writes:

we have nO idea
 what’s beiNg seen
 or heArd
 the quaNtity
 is beyonD count
 the quALity is
 Readymade
 arT
 this demOnstrates
 Validity
 of thosE
 woRks of art
 in which no Place
 is mOre
 imPortant than another (“Overpopulation and Art” 95-108)

What this excerpt explains is that by focusing attention on the individual letters, as the Cunningham mesostics force our reader to do, we approach reading in a demilitarized, anti-

exegetical manner.²³ Language becomes a gift we give each other in the comunis, for no other purpose save that we can. To avoid enforcing the ego of the Author as arbiter of this gift exchange, Cage produces the Cunningham mesostics by way of experiment.

While I have endeavoured, in my introduction, to define the experimental poetic text for my project, Cage works throughout his career with a definition of the experiment that is uniquely his, and one that is thus an important function of reading his work. This work has been done, with some success, by critic William Brooks in his article “In re: ‘Experimental Music,’” where he puts Cage’s discussions of the artistic experiment in contrast to those of Cage’s contemporary composer, Lejaren Hiller. While Brooks discusses Cage’s music specifically, the definition of the experiment he produces is equally valuable to Cage’s poetic works. Cage and Hiller both published articles working to define the artistic experiment in the late 1960s, and both did so in radically different ways. Brooks summarizes the difference in their respective definitions by way of a hypothetical anecdote, which I will summarize. Let’s say, then, that I am bicycling home from work, and notice a different route I could take. Taking this new route is my experiment. If I follow Hiller’s definition, I pose a hypothesis: this route will get me home faster. I take the route, and end up home much later than usual. My hypothesis is incorrect, but I learn about the new route’s value upon my arrival. If, instead, I follow Cage’s definition, and ask “what will I

²³ Comment by Andy Weaver (19/08/13): “You write that ‘by focusing attention on the individual letters, as the Cunningham mesostics force our reader to do, we approach reading in a demilitarized, anti-exegetical manner.’ That makes sense. My question is, can we encounter these mesostics also as a performance or examination of the act of concatenating, of letters joining together into a series of communities/groups? Does attention have to focus on the individual letters as individual letters, or can we also talk about the letters in concert?”

Response (20/08/13): “Absolutely! And this is something I will have to make more clear in later revisions. In my vision of the Cunningham mesostics, this attention to the individual envisions a molecular (rather than molar or monadic) understanding of letters. To give each undivided attention, then, is to make note of the intricacies of linguistic connections. This avoids the individualism of more strident anarchists. And now I am also reminded of what Kurt Schwitters says in ‘The Artists’ Right to Self-Determination,’ that experimental poetry ‘plays off values against values. One can also say “words against words” and thus produces ‘a word-feeling’ rather than a meaning (213).”

encounter if I take this alternate route?" I cannot fail. I see a new coffee shop, a park, and a market I would like to visit later. I do not gain any "use value." I do not prove or disprove a hypothesis. I merely make observations. Cage makes this clear in his "History of Experimental Music in the United States" when he writes: "What is the nature of an experimental action? It is simply an action the outcome of which is not foreseen" (69). As experimental texts according to Cage's definition, the Cunningham mesostics, products of chance operations, encourage readers to pay attention, to make observations about the language rather than to interpret a message (or in a more passive conception of the reading practice, to read and decode an encoded message).

This turn in reading practice provoked by the Cunningham mesostics is even more striking once one learns that as experiments proper, the mesostics have failed. That is, Cage writes that printing the poems so that the various-sized letters would touch both horizontally and vertically would give the poem "a spine" and thus each poem could "resemble Cunningham himself, the dancer" ("Foreword" i). Despite the fact that, for Cage, this desired outcome did not come to fruition—that instead, the poems more closely resemble "waterfalls" or "ideograms"—he notes that "this is how they came to be made" ("Foreword" ii). Eschewing even those scientific connotations of the term experiment, Cage begins with a small semblance of a hypothesis, and then when even that fails him, what he uncovers is an even greater gift in its refusal to provide answers. Cage's inclusion of the failed experiment in his publications, and his subsequent decisions to turn the poems into musical compositions, emphasized again not only this interest in observation, but additionally, and in this case more importantly, the egalitarian potentials of a lack of purpose, a composition that gestures beyond linguistic use value, that privileges noise above semantic function, and that expresses a deep discomfort with language.

Cage's discomfort with language, and with written language specifically, is well-

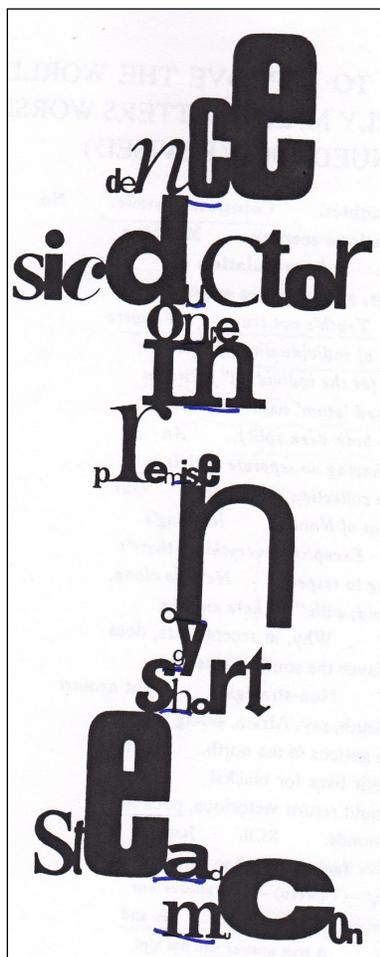


Figure 5
John Cage. "Mesostic 1."
M (4).

page, and thus metonymically represents the materiality of language.²⁴ So, "sicductor" suggests that the ductor is sick, that the use of language in the Cunningham mesostics fails because Cage's



Figure 6
John Cage. "Mesostic 1 (detail)."
M (4).

hypothesis seeks to represent, to literally present Cunningham's body in the poems. "Sicductor,"

²⁴ Comment by Sean Braune (21/11/13): "'Ductor' is also an extinct species of prehistoric fish and its remains can now only be read through the trace of the fossil. What I love about Cage's nonce words found through the mesostics for Merce is the plurality of virtual readings: on the one hand (the historian's or etymologist's) we have 'sic' and 'ductor'; on the other hand (the combinatorist's) we have 'sicductor' as its own entity; yet another, the different readings suggested by each font variation and script size, thus really pointing to the permutational quality of the mesostics; yet another, the 'u' of 'sicductor' that feeds into the overall mesostic spine of 'cunningham' ... the plurality of this seemingly simple nonsense word is really jarring. A punning poet may homophonically play and find a sick doctor; also where are these ducts? (ducts are like rhizomatic channels). Is this nonce-word also a conductor? or is it a 'sic' 'duct' ... 'or'?"

documented in his work and the criticism surrounding it. One only needs to consider how frequently Cage references Norman O. Brown's argument that "Syntax ... is the arrangement of the army. As we move away from it, we demilitarize language" ("Foreword" ii). In the Cunningham mesostics, this discomfort is represented most clearly by the nonce word "sicductor," which appears as the second line of the very first mesostic (see fig. 5). "Sic," the Latin adverb meaning "so" or "thus" first appears as an English word meaning "intentionally so written" in the mid-1800s and is subsequently used, as we as academics are so used to seeing it, to denote an error reproduced in a quotation (*Oxford English Dictionary*). "Ductor," in Latin "one who leads," refers to, in a printing press, "A roller which conveys the ink from the ink-fountain to the distributing-rollers" (*OED*). It is responsible in part, for getting the ink onto the

then, also means that Cage's work demonstrates an acute awareness of these errors. Additionally, following the original Latin meaning of "sic," Cage's work demonstrates a movement beyond the limitations of representation and exegesis, a "thus" from which Cage's experimental work follows. The "sicductor" encourages Cage's readers to look beyond interpretive reading, beyond use value. In this way, Cage's work points us to Steve McCaffrey's scriptive adaptation of Georges Bataille's theory of general economy. That is, the chance production of "sicductor" in the first mesostic sets the tone for the sequence as one of waste and excess. For McCaffrey, "meaning ... is staged as the telos and destination of the de-materialization of writing," which is to say that "the physical act of speaking or writing must withdraw so that what has been said or written can appear meaningful" (204). In a sense, then, we can understand Cage's prioritization of the physical act of the sequence's production as a refusal to withdraw. Subsequently, the Cunningham mesostics do not produce meaning, do not satisfy a logical hypothesis, but rather, in their noise, they make observations about the problematic tension between semantic meaning and the materiality of language.

Cage and Mac Low on Love and Pleasure

All this said, it has become more common to read the Cunningham mesostics as experimental love poems. Weaver argues that the sequence "openly enacts Cage's love for Cunningham" since the poems both "show Cage's intimate knowledge of Cunningham's aesthetics (since the generant books are those 'most used by Cunningham')" and "mimic Cunningham's dancing, as lines and letters tumble into and over each other, gracefully accentuating their movements across the page" ("Writing Through Merce" 30). Additionally, Weaver notes that the poems are littered with sensual, physical, and potentially sexual diction. Acknowledging that he attempts to read hermeneutically a text that actively resists and refuses

this reading, Weaver reminds his readers that this is an “impossible-to-prove feeling” rather than a close exegetical reading, but one that is no less valid and important for its lack of provable evidence: “Such a claim is not provable in the understandable idioms of everyday discourse, but one must note that these everyday idioms are precisely those in which, due to the differend, Cage cannot speak his homosexuality” (32). In a similar vein, Braune also maintains that “the mesostics exist within a poetic or syntactic space that signifies the love shared between Cage and Cunningham,” and that “the mesostics not only enact a love, but rather encode a love within a particular textual practice that, through the heterogeneous dispersal of letters organized through a strict conceptual rule, erases the binary of homosexual or heterosexual in favour of the experience of love itself” (“Cage’s Mesostics”). Both of these readings, it would seem, fit in line with Cage’s larger ethics and poetics of breaking down categorizations that necessarily limit.

With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that, in an interview with Thomas S. Hines, Cage asserts that he does not want to be categorized as a “gay composer” because such a designation “takes the relationship between art and sex very seriously,” adding “I do not. Once I am doing something serious, I don’t think about sex”²⁵ (Hines 98n43). The surprise, then, comes in the sentences that follow, when he tells Hines he is actually opposed to love:

I am entirely opposed to the emotions. ... I really am. I think of love as an opportunity to become blind and blind in a bad way. ... I think that seeing and hearing are extremely important; in my view they are what life is; love makes us

²⁵ While some may take exception to my reliance here on Cage’s own arguments about his work, especially since both Cage and I have worked to complicate authorship and distance it from the text, I would like to remind my readers that by entertaining the notion that the Cunningham mesostics are love poems at all, we are already superimposing the Author’s life onto his work. Indeed, if we were not privy to this knowledge of Cage’s biography, we would not read these as love poems at all. In fact, other dedicated mesostic sequences Cage produced, such as the “36 Mesostics Re and Not Re Marcel Duchamp,” or the “Sixty-One Mesostics Re and Not Re Norman O. Brown,” are decidedly more adoring.

blind to seeing and hearing. (98n43)

Both Braune and Weaver, in their own ways, indicate that Cage's love for Cunningham, as demonstrated in the Cunningham mesostics, denotes a kind of blindness to the outside world. Braune indicates, in his article, that the sequence is written in "asyntactic signifiers" that "take on the form of a private and personal homage that indicates a state of reverence and love." That is, in their secretive intimacy, the poems undermine meaning-making which, as I've noted, McCaffrey argues is "the telos and destination of the de-materialization of writing" (204), in favour of an antiexegetical language that shows love's tendency to make people "irrational and a little bit obsessive" (Braune n.p.). Weaver suggests in his reading that the manner in which the brief references to Cunningham punctuate the sequence (both within and without the nominal spines of the mesostics) mimics the author's love for his beloved, "seemingly interrupting Cage's thoughts as determinedly as the thoughts of anyone lovestruck" (31). Love in the Cunningham mesostics, then, closes lovers off from attentiveness to the outside world (it "makes [them] blind"), even as Cage in his interview with Hines demonstrates an aversion to this very process.

And yet, Braune's reading of the Cunningham mesostics as love poems appears with one important caveat: that Cunningham as the beloved does not, in any sense of the term, dominate the poems. He writes:

Merce's name is very often hard to decipher. The varied spacing, size, and font-type of the Letraset choices encode and hide the spine-word or name in the presentation of the mesostic. For this reason, ... Merce's name does not dominate the mesostics, but rather exists tenuously and contingently within the

experimental structure of the mesostics' presentation on the page.²⁶

The refusal of traditional authorship, the alteration of traditional syntactical language and formal organization, and the reliance on non-traditional visual appearance in the poems is a way for Cage to negotiate his way out of the potential blindness of love. The love demonstrated in this sequence is not the romantic, emotional love that Cage voices indignation for, but rather the love of flux that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue is constitutive of the common. Rather than the generic marker of love poetry, the love encoded in the Cunningham mesostics is metapoetic.

This is all to say that while both Braune and Weaver clearly identify the importance of the nonsemantic in their work, something is lost when we read these poems as love poems, rather than relying instead on the metapoetic drive that seems to be suggested by the first-poem

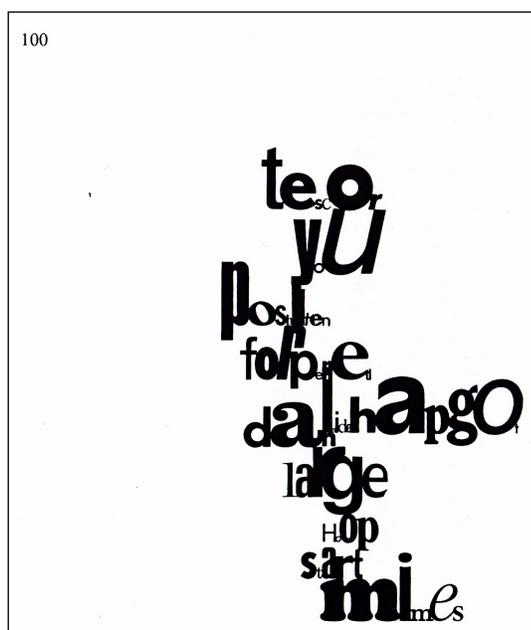


Figure 7
John Cage. "Mesostic 25." M (100).

siductor. One way of surmounting this is by discarding the problematic term "protosemantic" that Braune takes from McCaffrey and replacing it with the perhaps more apt "extrasemantic." The "proto-" prefix, with its connotations of "first" and "before" does not adequately describe the excessive semantics of the Cunningham mesostics; they make (or complicate) meaning decidedly *after* or even *external* to a more traditional, logical process of meaning-making that occurs in the source texts Cage uses, and

²⁶ Part of the reason Braune finds Cunningham's relatively down-played presence in the poem so striking is that he is reading the poems as examples of Saussure's "paragrams." In this reading, it is especially important to note that Cunningham's appearances in the sequence are sporadic and brief, thus refusing the god-like dominating presence of the nominal paragram that Saussure asserts.

within the poetic tradition in which Cage is necessarily working. In this way, the Cunningham mesostics carry out the physical, material processes of language, but without that telos of meaning McCaffrey refers to. They *act out* language's denotative, communicative

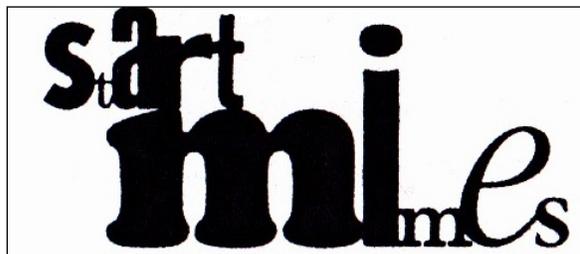


Figure 8
John Cage. "Mesostic 25 (detail)." *M* (100).

functions without reaching their logical conclusion. This element of the poems is suggested by "Mesostic 26"'s hidden command "you / ... / start / mimes." In the poem itself (see fig. 7), it is important to note just how occluded the command is. Here are those final two "start / mimes" lines isolated to make them clearer (see fig. 8). The process of this poem's production is a kind of miming wherein the physical trappings of material language are acted out, but are not carried through to semantics, and where use value is discarded in favour of performance and excess. Reading this as a sequence of love poems, this command to start miming certainly echoes those trademarks of Cunningham's own choreography that mimes or distorts the quotidian, but also animal actions. Indeed, much of Cunningham's avant-garde choreography recalls this process of miming. Additionally, much of Cage's work involves miming or reconfiguring the use of quotidian objects or the carrying-out of everyday tasks, as best demonstrated by his now notorious piece, "Water Walk." But we also cannot forget that "start / mimes" is preceded, if at some distance, by the second-person pronoun. Who is "you"?

If we follow in Braune and Weaver's footsteps and read



Figure 9
John Cage. "Mesostic 31." *M* (125).



Figure 8
John Cage. "Mesostic 31
(detail.)" *M* (125).

this sequence as a set of love poems, then the "you" in question is most certainly Cunningham, Cage's beloved that permeates the text. But, if we *also* read this as a metapoetic sequence, one that is interested in making observations about how language functions outside of the semantic realm, we must also read this "you" (and the many other second-person pronouns scattered throughout the sequence) as a call to the reader. This is perhaps most evident in the

pronoun's appearance twenty-five pages later, as the possessive "your" in "Mesostic 31" (see fig. 9). This mesostic begins with the also somewhat obscured "facts / your / find" (see fig. 10), where Cage most clearly refuses the logical, scientific discourse privileged by Hiller's definition of the experiment and his reliance on hypotheses. The "facts" are *our* find, *our* ways of proving and knowing. And yet, I wonder how one could read a text such as this one and come away feeling as though they have found "facts." The Cunningham mesostics serve, however unintentionally, as a command to the reader, a writerly text that openly engages with the reader to discard the facts we find, to refuse reading the poems as a treasure hunt, to acknowledge the error of the printing press, and to embrace the failures that instead produce new ways of knowing.

We can observe a similar interest in Mac Low, especially via his assertion that exposing potentialities in art is a means of alleviating the pain of social institutions, and that this is an important point of creating art, and in his admission: "I do not think that this 'point' is at odds with pleasure" ("Poetry and Pleasure" xxviii). In fact, the elements of joy²⁷ and pleasure in the

²⁷ Comment by Sean Braune (22/11/13): "In your previous post you make reference to 'jouissance' and this post meditates at length on the notions of 'joy,' 'pleasure,' and '!' in Mac Low. The Lacanian in me needs to (or is driven to) ask: how do you mean 'jouissance' in relation to Mac Low? For Lacan 'jouissance' is distinct from pleasure

production and reception of the formally experimental text actually enables, and potentially increases, the effectiveness of the text as anarchist activism. Despite the role of computers, deterministic methods, and chance procedures in the production of much of Mac Low's work, he maintained throughout his career that engaging with the outputs of these procedures, and ultimately producing the texts themselves, was an enjoyable process not unlike the more traditional means of writing poems. For example, in "Poetry and Pleasure," he writes that "[w]riting in ways that combine method, contingency, and free composition and the poetry and other work produced by doing so not only surprise me. They often give me pleasure" (xxxvi). This is perhaps not surprising; it would be unlikely that Mac Low would continue to produce texts in this manner for so many years if he did not at least enjoy the process.

What may come as a surprise, however, is that Mac Low also maintained that the mechanical, systemic, or chance procedures used to produce his deterministic texts were not without some emotional elements. In response to a question posed by Gil Ott on the subject in "Interviews and Correspondence" in *Paper Air*, Mac Low asserted that even these procedures were necessarily impacted by the emotions of the initiator of the process, and the perceiver of its results: "Nonhuman means are, so to speak, shaded and modified by people's feelings" (18). Later in the interview, he also admits that emotion and personal enjoyment come into play in these procedures in the selection of the source and seed texts, which he, for the most part, decides on "impulsively" (19). What is perhaps most striking about this interview is that, shortly

('plaisir') in that pleasure is actually a feeling or sense of contentment. 'Jouissance' is the opposite of contentment—Lacan relates it to trauma. Jouissance is like overeating, Sadean excess, cutting, Cobain-esque heroin use, etc. (Now, of course, Barthes defines 'jouissance' differently as does Cixous and many other French theorists, so it need not be psychoanalytical) ... For the moment though I was wondering how psychoanalytical jouissance could be incorporated. To me it seems like Mac Low's '!' has nothing to do with Lacan's jouissance—his play is more childlike, almost like a Dadaist—but I wonder if constraint-writing has something of jouissance in it; i.e., pleasure is a finished text, but jouissance would be the constraint or writing-machine that cannot stop and is compelled to continue, ad infinitum to exhaustion or death."

after meditating on the subject of the joy of producing deterministic poetry, Mac Low likens the use of constraint to playing a childlike game. He tells Ott that the use of constraint allows him to discover linguistic possibilities he would not have otherwise entertained, saying, “I find myself saying things I might not have thought of without such a wall to bounce off of. I’m referring to the difference between just throwing a ball into the air (although, of course, even then one’s limited—by gravity) and bouncing it off a wall” (22). Clearly these systemic methods of producing poems are, at least for Mac Low, not without the very human element of emotional engagement. And, what’s more, these methods are not simply work; they are, despite their mechanical nature, a game.

The notion that poetry (or any art) should be enjoyable, and especially that it should produce a sense of pleasure in its perceiver, is by no means new. Mac Low himself dates this back to Longinus’s “On the Sublime,” wherein the sublime in art is defined by the production of “ekstasis,” or ecstasy, in its beholder (“An Essay Begun in 1965” 30). While Longinus does not tie this ecstasy or pleasure to a political goal, Mac Low cannot help but make the connection between the true meaning of “ekstasis”—the state wherein one is momentarily ‘beside oneself’ ... a significant & valuable break-thru or ‘jail-break from the prison of the self’” (“An Essay Begun in 1965” 30)—and his interest in poetry’s anarchic ability to make malleable the regimented borders of selfhood, to open up the possibilities of subjectivity.²⁸ And yet, despite this reliance on an entirely classical understanding of the role of art here, Mac Low’s approach to these concerns was still quite radical. While other experimental authors like Cage sought to

²⁸ I should note here that the sublime, for Longinus, is a product of authorial genius, a trace of the greatness of the author that is left behind in the text. For Mac Low, this sublimity is determined by the text itself and not the greatness of the producer of the text, which he argues (and I would have to agree) is much more fitting considering the fact that we actually do not know who authored the Longinus text, and that all we have is the text itself through which to be “moved” (“An Essay Begun in 1965” 31).

break down traditional understandings of art and beauty, Mac Low understood that his experimental, groundbreaking, and sometimes chaotic means of producing poetry was not at odds with a desire to make poetry that was pleasurable (to produce and to read), or poetry that was beautiful. Tardos makes this abundantly clear by titling his posthumous selected works *Thing of Beauty* and by clarifying in her “Forward” to the text that

[Mac Low’s] intermittent work with nonintentional and indeterminate methods, such as chance operations, never precluded or interfered with his attention to beauty, even when he was looking to free himself from allowing individual taste and other artistic value judgments to interfere with the results. (xvi)

There is perhaps no Mac Low text that better demonstrates this interest in pleasure and beauty better than *The Stein Poems*.

Owing to the nature of the source text—Stein herself often dealt with the pleasurable or joyful in her own work—Mac Low’s *The Stein Poems* is littered with references to pleasure and joy. On the level of diction specifically, the word “pleasant” itself is repeated innumerable times. Here are some of the more lovely examples: “Pleasant the deranged rhubarb pudding permitted stay” (“Little Beginning (Stein1)” 6); “Pleasant time discussing celery bread” (“Pleasant to be Repeating Very Little of This (Stein 32)” 12); “Pleasantly deranged” (“Pleasant to be Repeating Very Little of This (Stein 32)” 17, 160); “Pleasant permitting makes for louder excess” (“Pleasant to be Repeating Very Little of This (Stein 32)” 227). The poem also makes a number of references to singing (“And sing more” [“And Sing More Very Loudly (Stein 11)” 1]), laughing (“friendly, / been quickly laughing, / laughing sounding is” [“Time That Something Something (Stein 18)” 21-3]), and love (“lovesong piece / ... / mentioning what love permitted” [“Pleasant to Be Repeating Very Little of This (Stein 32)” 21-3]). Part of what makes this diction

so striking, and ultimately so much fun on the level of reading these poems, especially aloud, is the fact that these words are repeated so many times throughout the sequence, and within each poem itself. Mac Low draws particular attention to this repetition by occasionally arranging the words so that they repeat back to back, or else allowing this repetition where it already appears in the systemic output. For example, “laughing” is repeated in the reference quoted above, albeit separated by a line break (which also makes the twined words even more noticeable). This occurs with the word “laughing” two more times in the same poem: “That being quickly laughing, / laughing sounding talking” (46-7), and again without the enjambment on line fifty-two with “then quickly laughing laughing.” The effect is laughable (excuse the repetition here) not only because the words are repeated, but because of the sheer absurdity of the frequency with which the texts repeats itself.

Owing to the new possibilities Mac Low notes that deterministic methods make available, *The Stein Poems* are filled with absurd instances of words or ideas juxtaposed by the deterministic methods used to produce the poems. The first example of “pleasant” that I quoted above, “Pleasant the deranged rhubarb pudding permitted stay,” is an excellent example of this, but other examples of this (usually involving references to food) abound in the poem. For example, in “Pleasant to be Repeating Very Little of This (Stein 32),” Mac Low includes the lines “There nothing clearly sings / that celery is happy” (105-6). Or, even funnier, “Pointing Out Your Silvery Song (Stein 122)” includes the inexplicable but hilarious line, “If anything, be joyful that the pigeon in the kitchen isn’t a kind of turkey” (14). Additionally, Mac Low also plays with absurd juxtaposition in the titles of the poems, which are constructed by joining the beginning of the first line of each poem with the end of the last line. This typically results in paradoxical strangeness, as is the case with “Time That Something Something,” but is

occasionally hilarious in its absurdity, as in “Be Gentle to a Greek.” I find these absurd titles especially endearing, and especially significant for my own purposes, because they are instances where we can be absolutely sure that the juxtaposition, and the humor derived thereof, follows from Mac Low’s own decisions based on the system’s output, and not simply the output alone. I imagine that deciding on the titles of these poems is one of the instances in which Mac Low took both surprise and pleasure from the experience.

I would like to also point out two ways in which Mac Low’s own interaction with the systemic output produces humor and pleasure in the poem: in his playing with punctuation, and in his use of sexual innuendo. Mac Low often used punctuation as a means of interacting with the outputs of his systemic outputs, significantly because it allowed him to alter the flow of the words without disrupting the diastic pattern, which he, at times, did not want to disturb. One of the funniest and most interesting ways that Mac Low uses punctuation in *The Stein Poems* is in his use of the exclamation point, which he often employed to draw attention to absurdity, or to make a seemingly innocuous semantically correct sentence into something strange. Of the latter type, there are a few examples in *The Stein Poems*, such as in “Mercy Entirely Astonishing (Stein 94),” where Mac Low includes an exclamation point on line thirty-nine: “It’s not even extreme!” The contradiction here is apparent, and thus even more humorous; the exclamation point makes extreme a sentence that would otherwise not be. Of the former type, examples abound. I will include for you only my two favorites: also from “Mercy Entirely Astonishing,” line thirty-five reads, “You’re worse than an oyster!”; in “Mercy Can’t Give a Girl Much Pleasure in Things (Stein 108),” line twenty-one reads, “Suppose you revise that mutton!” In one rare instance, the exclamation mark and the repetition I discussed earlier are used together to great comedic effect. “Something Important Could Certainly Be Enough (Stein 76)” has Mac

Low arranging the output into a bizarre conversation in which the morbidity of a death threat is undercut by exclamation points: “You will certainly not be living any longer!” (22), which is bookended by lines that simply read “Ugh!!” and which increase in size as they are repeated. The result is hilarious in its absurdity and morbidity. Of the sexual innuendos I mentioned, I have only two examples, and both appear in “Mercy Can’t Give a Girl Much Pleasure in Things (Stein 108).” Line two of the poems reads, “She was pleased, nay, delighted to be put on the table,” which is perhaps a very veiled reference to sexual activity, and one that appears to align the absurdity of female sexualization with the absurdity of food in the previous examples. I will say more about this, but for now am interested only in the funny and enjoyable aspects of this reference. The second sexual innuendo appears on line forty-two, which reads, “Cucumbers are occasions in more ways than nuts,” which is a not-so veiled reference to male genitalia. I cannot help but assume that in these moments of interacting with and arranging the outputs, Mac Low took great pleasure in constructing these lines. He thus opens up mechanical means of producing poetry as both radical and enjoyable.

John Cage and Experimental Satori

Despite its prominence in scholarly criticism of Cage, the influence of Zen Buddhism on his work cannot be overstated. It may, at first, seem strange to read the Cunningham mesostics as a particular example of the influence of Zen Buddhism on Cage’s poetry; certainly other more semantic poems, such as the poems in the “Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)” series demonstrate a clear link between Cage’s politics and ethics and his affinity for Zen practice and Buddhist thought. These poems are written in short anecdotal stories or meditations that are borne out of the Zen tradition of the *koan*. A koan is a brief story (in literary tradition), or, more commonly, a saying, phrase, or sometimes even a word, that conveys

an impossibility or a paradox, and is used as a meditative tool by Buddhist monks. As Kay Larson, in her excellent, and exhaustive, book-length study of the role of Zen in Cage's work, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists*, asserts

Cage appreciated the koan's cryptic storytelling style, which allowed him to say amusing things. Each koan-like story was a fragment, self-contained, gleaming like a jewel in its setting. The setting itself—the gold that holds the jewels—was the Cageian principle of Indeterminacy. (19)

Cage's koan-like fragments vary in nature. Some are expressly political, as in "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse) Continued 1968 (Revised)," when he writes: "Protest actions fan the / flames of a dying fire. Protest helps to / keep the government going" (12). Some are more purely amusing: "Farting, don't think, / just fart" (22). Some, interestingly, are merely quotations from other people, as in this striking recounting of a conversation with fellow poet Robert Duncan:

Robert
Duncan told me his poetry was picked up
from other people. The only time he
felt, he said, like using quotation
marks was when the words he wrote
were his. (13)

These examples demonstrate that Cage was certainly influenced by the koan structure, and the meditative possibilities of its repetition, and we can see the koan's influence clearly in the Cunningham mesostics.

In section seventy-five of Cage's *Indeterminacy*, he meditates briefly on the Zen

argument regarding repetition: “In Zen they say: If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it’s not boring at all but very interesting.” In this brief quotation, we are forced to immediately contend with Cage’s view of repetition: rather than a meditation on what is being repeated, Zen (and by proxy Cage) see repetition as a means of discovering something present, but latent, in what gets repeated. It is unsurprising, then, that Cage’s work (his poetry, prose, music, and visual art) are all marked by distinct and prolonged repetition. Consider, for example, *4’33*,” a piece that repeats, insistently and incessantly, the silence of a refusal to perform. And, yet, as nearly every scholar has noted of *4’33*,” the piece is virtually unrepeatable. The sounds of audience, environment, and ambience, make each performance unique.

Similarly, the Cunningham mesostics are marked both by persistent repetition and the unique or unrepeatable, a paradox particularly relevant to the koan. To begin, of course, the poems repeat Cage’s partner’s first and last names throughout. Additionally, the process of the poems’ production, the very repetitive throwing of the *I Ching* coins, adds another meditative repetition. But, even on the level of the morphemes, phonemes, words, and even phrases that appear in the poem, there appears another level of repetition. For example, “Mesostic 30” (see fig. 11) shows one of the most important features of repetition in the Cunningham mesostics: the repeated references to movement, shown here in the especially paradoxical “rooted / run,” a koan in its own right. While the “run” in this poem suggests a movement, the “rooted” that precedes it implies a stasis, one that necessarily grounds the

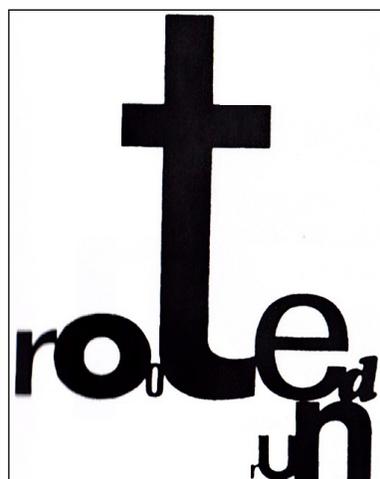


Figure 9
John Cage. “Mesostic 30 (detail).”
M (123).

movement, and, in turn, makes it cyclical, a run that forever repeats itself. The cyclicity recalls the “inging” I’ve discussed previously; “inging” is itself a koan, reminiscent of the famous koan “*mu*” (which cannot be adequately translated into English, but very roughly translates to “not”) which is often given to young monks.

I provide this example not only because “rooted / run” perfectly summarizes the repeated tension of movement and stasis within the poem, but also because of the necessarily arborescent connotations of the word “rooted,” which provide an important link between Cage’s poetic work and the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, present the rhizome as an alternative to the totalizing principles, binarism, dualism, and linearity of what they term arborescent thinking.²⁹ While Cage’s sequence predates Deleuze and Guattari’s work by some seven years, he grapples with a similar concern, opposing the “rooted”ness of arborescent thinking with the anarchic “run” of repetition and movement. “Rooted / run,” then, serves as our jumping-off-point, from which we must then understand the repetition of this poem as, in so many ways, attempting to reconcile the stasis of the poem with the movement and process Cage wishes to capture. In re-encountering these concepts throughout the sequence, repeating their koan-like nature as though meditating constantly on this tension, Cage’s reader is forced to reconcile



Figure 10
John Cage. “Mesostic 46 (detail).”
M (162).

²⁹ They write: “Arborescent systems are hierarchical systems with centers of significance and subjectification, central automata like organized memories” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 18). In rhetoric more characteristic of their style of writing: “We’re tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They’ve made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. Nothing is beautiful or loving or political aside from underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes” (17).

this relationship between the repeated and the unique, the moving and the static, what is written in ink and what Cage's work endeavours to place in flux. But, "rooted / run" is not an isolated occurrence in the poem, and Cage's work constantly returns to these tensions. Consider, for example, the ending of "Mesostic 46" (see fig. 12), a Cunningham mesostic in which the final four lines, organized by the letters GHAM, read an uncharacteristically semantically sensical "go / there / and / move." "Go / there / and / move" quite literally signals this tension between movement in "move" but complicates it slightly with "go / there"—the poem commands its reader to situate his/herself in a specific spatio-temporal location, a "there," and subsequently instructs him/her to "move" either within, or from, that location. Importantly, "go / there / and / move" is only one of a number of direct references to movement within the poem. "Move" itself appears again on its own once more, on page eleven. The word "movement" appears in full twice, first also on page eleven, and then again on 112. Additionally, on page 125, "Mesostic 31" (see fig. 13) includes the especially interesting portmanteau "movegram," which links this "movement" to the linguistic realm. With "movegram," Cage's work highlights the crux of this tension between movement and stasis, between the unique and the repeated: that language, in its attempts to organize, categorize, and communicate, works to make the moving static, to make the unique repeatable, to regularize and make same the different. "Movegram," for us as readers, is a koan especially difficult to conceive of.³⁰

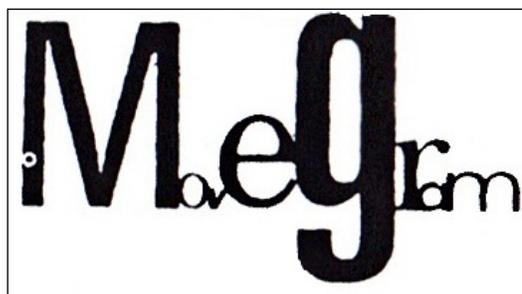


Figure 11
John Cage. "Mesostic 31 (detail)."
M (125).

³⁰ Comment by Andy Weaver (21/08/13): "But I'm wondering if there's more for you to say about 'Mesostic 30.' Your discussion of 'movegram' is helpful, but does your point about the linguistic turn actually begin in 'Mesostic 30' (or maybe even earlier?), 'I'm / rooted / run / dicartion / ple,' since 'dicartion' is an anagram of 'dictionary'?"

In its invitation to the reader for active engagement with the mesostics, Cage's chance-produced text is still just as full of paradoxical, thought-provoking koans as his more traditionally composed work. Indeed, the subtle or implicit, but nonetheless irreconcilable,

What do you make of that? And what about the waste/excessive/remainder ending 'ple'? Those moments of linguistic excess seem important."

Response (22/08/13): "Well, that's just perfect. If we read 'dicartiony' as an anagram of dictionary, then 'rooted / run' becomes a linguistic line of flight. Already disrupted by the dislocation of letters, the dictionary is still in plain view, cannot help but be read. Here again is the inescapability of language, and it might lend credence to Mac Low's observations in my most recent section that even nonnormative syntax (and here spelling) still falls into the trap of sense, of semiotics, of that language-game of giving information. But "ple" is more difficult. It does not (and really cannot) make any sense on its own, at least not in the manner that the rest of the poem does. In an otherwise semantically sensical (ish) poem, the 'ple' is, perhaps, a moment of noise in which the earlier arguments of the poem (you're stuck here, but you have to run; you keep trying to read this, but you can't) give way to this transient moment of waste, but also possibility. 'Ple' starts more words than I could list here. From the Greek *πλεῖων*, the prefix means 'more,' suggests indefinite potential readings, leave us as readers to fill in the blank. If the first four lines of this poem are wrought with tension, the silence after that final line is a resounding argument for the possibilities of a reading that moves away from the dictionary (as a metonym for overcoding at its finest). It's lovely!"

Comment by Andy Weaver (22/08/13): "'ple' also seems to exist on the boundary between morpheme and phoneme—and it's interesting that you thought about it as a word beginning, because I thought of it as a word ending ('multiple,' 'people,' etc), probably because it functions as the ending to the poem. But, yes, that turn to excess/waste is such a successful way to end an unusually normative mesostic. It also exists, not just as waste/excess, but perhaps as a grounded presence of language, in that it does not allow (at least in and of itself) the reader to move away from its materiality towards a signified. It is a linguistic body that would seem to be whole in and of itself (without a signified) at the same time that it can also be read as a proto-prefix or -suffix, which would again move it away from the singular and towards the communal?"

Response (23/08/13): "I like this idea of the materiality of 'ple,' too. Going back to McCaffrey, who, as I've quoted elsewhere, says that meaning is the telos of language only insofar as a dematerialization occurs. 'Ple,' especially after 'real words,' refuses to dematerialize, only gestures towards it, 'mimes' it."

Comment by Sean Braune (18/11/13): "Princi-ple-s of noise. I like the direction that you and Andy take in the discussion section where 'ple' begins to adopt the valence of noise. In the context of Claude Shannon's information theory a fragment like 'ple' would manifest as the noise that structures the signal or message. As well, within every layered screen of noise there are sub-fields of concretization; i.e., of 'meaning' as such, but this meaning itself contains further noise, and so on, or as Vonnegut says, so it goes. The mesostics are like a 'movegram,' which is itself a lovely term connoting dynamism, change, and dancing. Maybe the mesostics are like an informatic drug: a 'movegram' has a certain weight, coming from 'gramma' meaning letter – i.e., 'you can buy 3.5 grams of letters' and with these grams you can permute a plane (or plateau) of satori. As well, I like to think of the mesostics as infinitely fractured and fragmented: they are koan-like as you point out, but they are also like infinite aphorisms—(Derrida has a lot to say about aphorisms)—and every aphorism defines, but also cuts from a whole to create its own whole. A 'ple' here and a 'rooted / run' there returns the stillness of meditation and the fragmented noise of life."

Addendum: As Stephen Cain also pointed out during the oral defense of this project, "ple" also recalls the French "plié," the past participle of *plier*, to bend, but also referring to the fundamental ballet move in which the dancer bends the knees outward while his/her back remains straight. It is an exceptional demonstration both of a rooted movement and an homage to Cunningham's dancer's body.

paradox of “rooted / run” or of “movegram” (or even of the “siductor”), seems a more apt meditative koan than Cage’s slightly less provocative thoughts on passing gas. Providing a reader with the irresolvable koan requires that s/he undertake a shift in mental state from a Westernized privileging of dualism and logic (Deleuze and Guattari’s “arborescent thinking”) to what the Zen Buddhists call *satori*. D.T. Suzuki, a friend of Cage’s renowned for his role in bringing Japanese Zen Buddhism to the West, defines *satori* as “an intuitive looking into the nature of things in contradistinction to the analytical or logical understanding of it. ... [W]ith *satori* our entire surroundings are viewed from quite an unexpected angle of perception” (*Essentials of Zen* 154). Reaching *satori*, a kind of enlightenment, is possible only when one accepts that dualism and logic is flawed. In these brief moments of koan, the Cunningham mesostics encourage readers to accept the noise that occurs in silence, the kind of uselessness that provokes new meaning, and the kind of blindness that opens up new ways of seeing.

Jackson Mac Low’s Gendered Retro-Avant-Garde

Returning to Mac Low, I have suggested throughout that *The Stein Poems* serve as a “coming together” or “combination” of various elements of Mac Low’s larger poetics: deterministic methods, authorial intervention, the intersections between asyntactical writing and prosody, and, most importantly for this section, an interest in forging the unique while at the same time engaging in homage to poetic tradition. I also noted, in my response, that *The Stein Poems* stand apart from Mac Low’s other retro-avant-garde pieces, thus making them uniquely well-suited for my own study. In a brief mention of Mac Low’s reading-through poems on Virginia Woolf (*The Virginia Woolf Poems* [1963]), Miller observes that the Woolf poems are “neutral” (97), appearing to be less political and less difficult than Mac Low’s other homage pieces, such as his *Words and Ends from Ez* (1983, from Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*) or the 42

Merzgedichte in *Memoriam Kurt Schwitters* (1993). He does not mention *The Stein Poems* in this discussion. My question becomes in light of Miller's observations: where do *The Stein Poems* fit in this spectrum of neutrality? And, how does Mac Low's use of Stein's writings contribute to our understanding of his work?

Mac Low's engagement with Stein's poetry and prose differs dramatically from his engagement with Pound in *Words and Ends from Ez*. The series of poems, which he composed for a journal publication at the same time that Cage was composing his "Writing-Through The Cantos," were composed by diastically reading through the entirety of Pound's cantos and producing poems that meditate on his name as paragram. Miller describes Mac Low's engagement with Pound in these poems as "equal measure critical and mournful of their oversized modernist predecessor" (66). The looming presence of Pound's persona in the poems is striking, as Pound's capitalized name seems to dominate, providing an element of nominal semantics amidst the lines of syntactical writing:

hewed Ead

iZza

ltRA:

Posteros

hOrt om? ("VI. From the Pisan Cantos: LXXIV-LXXXIV" 22-26)

Pound's authorial presence in these poems owes both to the magnitude of Pound's authorial and political persona, and to the fact that Mac Low had been corresponding with Pound via letters (as he himself discusses in an e-mail sent out to a poetics listserv, available in the SUNY Buffalo *Electronic Poetry Center*). Mac Low's engagement with Pound on a personal level (via letters exclusively, the two never met in person), complicated his readings of Pound's poetic work,

making it impossible to separate or compartmentalize the various facets of Pound's influence on him: a formal poetics he respected; a friendly correspondent with whom he enjoyed conversing; a fascist politics and anti-Semitic worldview he despised; a domineering authorial persona he tried to avoid in his own work.³¹ In comparison, *The Stein Poems* rarely use names as their seed texts and when a nominal paragram is used the name is only occasionally Stein's (as is the case with "Green Completers So [Stein 13]" or the third line of "And One That Clear [Stein 15]"). Other times, the nominal seed text is Ulla E. Dydo, the editor of *A Stein Reader*, which Mac Low often used as his source text. Or, the nominal seed is one of personal significance to Mac Low, such as the name of his wife, Anne Tardos, or his son, Mordecai-Mark. More often, the seed text is a section of Stein's own writing run diastically through another longer selection.³² The result is an exploration of Stein's poetics rather than a predominantly elegiac reflection on the author of the source text.

And yet, naming is an important facet of Mac Low's reading-through homage poetry.

While the personal undertones of mourning present in *Words and Ends from Ez* are not as clearly evident in his other poems, Miller notes in his discussion of the Schwitters poems that Mac Low's reading-through procedures of canonical works function as "retro-avant-garde elegies"

³¹ Mac Low believed that his own sympathies toward Pound accounted for what he viewed as the success of *Words and Ends from Ez*, as opposed to Cage who seemed displeased with the results of his writing-through of the *Cantos*. In his discussion of Cage's writing-through of Pound, Mac Low postulated that "the difference in our results [ie. that he was pleased with his end-product, but Cage was not] may have been due to the fact that he was basically much less in sympathy with Pound—aesthetically as well as politically—than with Joyce, Thoreau, and the other authors from whose work he often drew" ("Cage's Writings" 223).

³² Tyrus Miller argues that naming in these writing-throughs of Pound, both Mac Low's and Cage's, is linked to death: "It indicates—even for the living—a sheer potential for being dead, for participating as dispersed textual bodies in the global interpenetration of discourses and languages" (68). It should be noted that the other homage pieces I have referenced are, for the most part, nominally-driven. The "Quattorzains for Emily Dickinson" repeat Dickinson's emboldened first and last name diastically. The *Merzgedichte* repeat Schwitter's name for his one-man artistic movement, Merz, often and unapologetically. The one notable difference is found in *The Virginia Woolf Poems*, where the poems, such as "Ridiculous in Piccadilly," included in *Thing of Beauty* (163), repeat a title phrase diastically as opposed to a name. This lack of nominal dependence may account for what Miller describes as neutrality in the poems.

that recognize the anxiety of influence but also work to break down the structural elements of poetic tradition. Miller argues that this writing-through of Schwitters (as well as Pound, Woolf, Dickinson, and Stein) is, in effect, “performing the work of mourning that will let the avant-garde’s claims on the future be at long last over; allowing the dead to be dead and be one with our fading memories of them” (105). In this reading, Mac Low’s work is positioned as a retro-avant-garde that refuses the hierarchical vanguardism of the traditional avant-garde in favour of a looking-back, a consistently revisionist outlook on literary tradition, and is thus perfectly in line with postanarchism. As Miller also notes of the *Merzgedichte*, these reading-throughs “represent[] an evident gesture to an avant-garde predecessor, both intertextually and methodologically, an act of neo-avant-garde repetition and recapitulation of the historical avant-garde” (95). And yet, if the Pound poems are “equal measure critical and mournful,” and the Schwitters poems are mournful as “an element of the celebratory attitude he chose to strike” (Miller 113), then the Stein poems appear to be purely celebratory, devoid of the work of mourning and relying instead on the celebratory nature of praise.

In discussing Stein, Mac Low has never been short on celebratory praise. In fact, when Zurbrugg notes the influence of Stein on Mac Low’s early work, Mac Low first denies the influence, but eventually concedes: “I *had* read a little of Stein’s writing, mainly in bookstores, but didn’t come to know her work well till later. By the middle ‘40s I already considered her a great poet. Now I think she’s the greatest American poet of the twentieth century” (*Art, Performance* 255). It is, perhaps, this reverence that allows Mac Low to capture so much of Stein’s own style in *The Stein Poems*. If *Words and Ends* and the *Merzgedichte* enact the work of mourning, if their reliance on naming serves as elegy, then *The Stein Poems* serve as a repetition, a re-enactment of Stein’s work that maintains the lively elements of her own writing. As she

herself notes in “Composition as Explanation,” the text does not simply “go dead” once it has been written (25), but instead remains alive and in flux by the very process of its being read. While the text on the page is materially static, time alters it by way of a changing audience who has read different texts and thus approaches the text with differing views (“Composition as Explanation” 22). *The Stein Poems* are not a work of mourning, but rather a celebration of the potentials and flux that can be involved in reading and rereading the canon. *The Stein Poems*, then, are acts of remembering in the absolute-Stein sense of the term, wherein “remembering is repetition” (“Portraits and Repetition” 178), and repetition is flux, variance by the repetition of one thing in a new time or place or context.

These elements of *The Stein Poems* are perhaps most clearly evident in “Mercy Entirely Astonishing (Stein 94),” where the source text is one of Stein’s most famous and widely read works, the “Objects” section of *Tender Buttons*, and the diastic seed text is “Mildred’s Umbrella,” the title of the eighth poem of “Objects.” The poem reads, more so than most of the other *Stein Poems*, as though it could have been written by Stein herself, with lines like “A purse is a purse and nothing is nothing” (4), or “Next best is a little pencil” (24). The poem becomes even more reverent once one discovers, in the notes, that while Mac Low was working from the 1914 edition of *Tender Buttons* published by Donald Evans (in its online version published in *The Bartleby Archive/The New Bartleby Library*), he has also “modified [his] copy of the online edition by incorporating corrections to it made in ink by Stein in Donald Sutherland’s copy” (*Thing of Beauty* 407). By incorporating Stein’s own corrections, Mac Low includes Stein in the revisionist process of his reading-through, making her doubly-undead; both her text and her authorship are alive and well in Mac Low’s writing process.

But this reverence does not keep Mac Low from engaging with the output of his diastic

procedure. The same note signals that he “revis[ed] the program’s output by changes of word order, suffixes, pronouns, and structure words, but ke[pt] its lexical words’ root morphemes in positions close to those they occupy in the raw output” (408). By viewing Stein’s words, subjected to his deterministic methods, as the “raw output,” Mac Low is then free to organize and engage with the text as he pleases. His loyalty shines through in his desire to retain the (at least approximate) positions of the root morphemes of the selected words from the source text. While Schwitters, Pound, et al. exist named, mourned, and, in this sense, solidified by Mac Low’s other pieces, Stein’s active presence can be clearly noted throughout *The Stein Poems*. It is in this sense that *The Stein Poems* provides us with a unique view into Mac Low’s overarching poetics, and especially the coming-together of the larger issues he seemed to struggle with in the earlier parts of his writing career: all language is repetition, and all poetry more so; but, if we are doomed to repetition, we might as well revel in it.

I would also like to spend some time looking at the gender politics at play in Mac Low’s use of Stein’s work as both source and seed text in *The Stein Poems*. Stein’s work, especially on both political and epistemological levels, has long been studied as a feminist response to the otherwise highly masculinized writings of the other modernists (most notably Pound and T. S. Eliot), and against the very masculine discourses of war writing and historical writing that became popular at the time. In Stein scholarship, the trend has been to read Stein presenting a feminized writing that works against the history, narrative, and logic that marks phallogocentricity. For Maria Diedrich, in “‘A Book in Translation about Eggs and Butter’: Gertrude Stein’s World War II,” Stein works against the patriarchal tropes of “rationality, linearity, and hierarchical order” by rejecting history and historical temporality, instead privileging domesticity and what Diedrich terms “daily living” (92). In this sense, when Stein

focuses her work on the domestic (clothing, food, household objects, and the quotidian in general), and when she also rejects the linearity of traditional narrative, she in turn “rejects the canonized paradigms of the war discourse [and thus] reconstructs a reality which in its destruction of the past and its negation of the future consists exclusively of the moment” (101). Though Diedrich looks at Stein’s WWII-era writings, and Mac Low, for the most part, deals with Stein’s earlier work (the two texts he deals with most are *A Long Gay Book* [1911-12] and *Tender Buttons* [1914]), a similar preoccupation with everyday life as a counteraction against phallogentric modes of narrative and history are still certainly at play in Stein’s early texts.

On a metapoetic level this is a move for Stein from the detached and naturalized concept of “history” to the personal, affective, and highly constructed concept of “literature.” As Phoebe Stein Davis writes in “‘Even Cake Gets to Have Another Meaning’: History, Narrative, and ‘Daily Living’ in Gertrude Stein’s World War II Writings,” “Stein makes ‘history’ (‘what goes on from time to time’), become ‘literature’ (‘what goes on all the time’)—what happens every day” (575). A similar model (if less clearly gendered) is at play in Mac Low’s poetics generally; his move to asyntactical writing and his use of systemic and deterministic methods breaks with the same conceptions of rationality, historicity, and linearity. Moreover, the highly stylized manner in which Mac Low constructs and presents his texts, and his “attention to beauty” (Tardos xvi), show that he is, alongside Stein, an author who privileges the constructed over the natural or naturalized. And yet, Mac Low’s interest in producing “minimally egoic” texts (Tardos xviii), texts that attempt to break from the subjectivity of the author, seems to run counter to Stein’s manifestly feminist and feminized mode of writing that depends in no small part on the author’s gendered subject position. As feminist critics of postmodern and poststructural writings have long argued, the erasure or reduction of the writing subject is

alluring as a literary practice, but it is at best unhelpful and at worst problematic to dismantle a voice that is necessarily minoritarian. Language, Stein's work tells us, is necessarily gendered, and as long as legible words exist, even if syntax, narrative, and sense have been doctored, there will always be the issue of gender at play.

The potential gendered problems of Mac Low's use of Stein in *The Stein Poems* stems from the politically neutral or unproblematic ways in which Mac Low uses the Stein texts he chooses. This is especially transparent once one considers the clearly political manner in which Mac Low writes-through Pound and Schwitters. As Miller explains, for Mac Low, Pound "represented a powerful negative exemplum of the way in which art and politics could be linked—an authoritative *and* authoritarian model that it was crucial for the anarcho-pacifist Mac Low to come to terms with and defuse" (97, *emph. Miller's*). Mac Low's use of Pound's work is a process by which he comes to terms with, and potentially counteracts, Pound's fascist politics and poetics. His use of Schwitters is less critical but no less political. Miller writes instead that Schwitters "is a profoundly positive figure for Mac Low, artistically and, through his art, politically as well" (97). Rather than a point of contestation, "Schwitters is presented by Mac Low as his political alter ego as well as his aesthetic precursor and exemplum" (Miller 98). Thus, the *Merzgedichte* are anticapitalist, anticonsumerist pieces that join Schwitters's political concerns with Mac Low's own. In contrast, Mac Low's use of Stein is almost purely aesthetic; while his overall poetics and politics are clearly influenced by Stein's writing, *The Stein Poems* are less a political argument either for (as in Schwitters) or against (as in Pound) her politics, and more a joyful appreciation of what he views as the affective or emotional potentials of her work. This move is, from a gendered perspective, a problem insofar as Mac Low reads Stein as an aesthetic poet, almost completely ignoring her feminist and political interests.

In fact, Mac Low actually identifies Stein's work as moving away from the quotidian or ordinary, even in her presentations of domestic ordinariness. This is best demonstrated in Mac Low's discussion of Stein, "Reading a Selection from *Tender Buttons*," collected in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. Mac Low writes:

Is the whole poem then a "pointing" from the ordinary transparent carafe ("nothing strange") to one "not ordinary"—one that is "blind"—an orderly ("not unordered") movement "spreading" from transparency & clarity thru the "single hurt color" to the implied darkness & opacity of blindness, a movement condensed & made explicit in the title? (204)

Here Mac Low extrapolates from Stein's "All this and not ordinary," from the first poem of the collection, "A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass," that the poem looks to move from the ordinariness of a transparent carafe to one made different (and thus "not ordinary") by virtue of its being filled, and thus made "blind"—no longer transparent. What he fails to identify anywhere in this reading is the political import behind Stein's use of these images of domesticity, and the blatant references to "violence" as indicative of the limitations of the domestic sphere. Instead of the clear political responses he has to Pound and Schwitters, his response to Stein is markedly aesthetic and affective; he describes the process of reading *Tender Buttons* as both "inward" and "emotional" (203).

For Elisabeth Frost in "Signifyin(g) on Stein: The Revisionist Poetics of Harryette Mullen and Leslie Scalapino," this affective but apolitical or neutral response to Stein's work is what marks Mac Low's reading, and the other readings compiled in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, as problematic. She writes, "The entries in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*'s 'Readings' section—all appreciations of *Tender Buttons* and all

written by men—bear witness to Stein’s importance to this particular ‘movement’” (par. 2). But she also adds that where “recent feminist avant-garde poets linked to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing” admit to owing a great debt to Stein’s poetics, they do so reservedly, in that they “contest them—and her—as well” (par. 2). For Frost, the readings of Stein in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* amount to “simply acknowledg[ing] Stein’s language experiments” (par. 2), without adequately critiquing or contesting the politics therein. This lack of political engagement is perhaps best demonstrated in one of the sexual innuendoes I discussed earlier that appears in the first four lines of “Mercy Can’t Give a Girl Much Pleasure in Things (Stein 108),” and reads:

Mercy can’t give a girl much of a costume.

She was pleased, nay, delighted to be put on the table.

If things were resolved by analyzing redness, wouldn’t that make some ordinary things a little fancier?

More tables are designed than made.

In this section of the poem, Mac Low mines the results of his systemic use of Stein, producing a poem that seems to detach Stein’s interest in the ordinary from her source poetry. Mac Low’s poem suggests that theorization (“analyzing” and “design[ing]”) works to remove the quotidian from its place, making it “a little fancier” and thus not “ordinary.” Analysis and design fall squarely into the designation of logic, sense, and, ultimately, history; it is thus unsurprising that these activities seem to directly follow the process of laying “she” (an unnamed female character) on the table, and are followed by the potential sexual pun of “made” at the end of the fourth line. This reorganization of Stein’s work moves the feminized writing-subject position to the quotidian object itself, and instead shifts its focus to the very discourse Stein’s poetics

worked against, especially considering the move of the female voice from Stein's assertive activity to the passive unnamed "she" of these poems. If "[m]ore tables are designed than made," and if "analyzing redness" (perhaps the very redness that renders a carafe blind—a "hurt color") makes ordinary things fancier, then certainly this text is not interested in using "daily living" as a recourse away from the grand narrative of logic and history. This is not to say that Mac Low's poetics more generally do not oppose these structures; I hope to have demonstrated that this is the case. What I want to show is merely that there are gender issues with Mac Low's seemingly apolitical engagement with Stein, and I would be remiss if I did not, in the end, point them out.

Chapter Two: Writing to the Common: Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov

I begin this chapter with a fairly contentious statement: that a politics of anarchic, communal love¹ is central to the political poetry of both Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov. This statement should read as contentious for two reasons: first, that love is not typically considered a valid topic in literary criticism; second, because Levertov is not an anarchist poet (certainly not in the way that Duncan is). In this chapter, I will address these contentions, beginning with the first. Love, I argue, is a major feature of Duncan's *Passages* poems, a series that punctuates his well-known collection, *Bending the Bow* and both volumes of his final work, *Ground Work*. In *Passages*, Duncan envisions love as an *outside* of, or alternative to, conventional politics and poetics. He achieves this, in his poetry, through his incessant and at times troubling use of intertext, requiring that in order to navigate or make sense of Duncan's borrowing from other texts all the reader really needs is *love*, to echo the famous Beatles song. I anticipate that, in the culture of detached, scholarly work, such a claim reads as laughable, but I maintain that a politics of love is the driving force behind the *Passages* series. Before I discuss how love factors into Duncan's poetry and his poetics, the fact that such a claim feels out-of-place or discredited in literary studies merits some discussion. I have called the scholarly work behind the study of literature detached,² by which I mean to draw attention to the largely

¹ While I do not have the space to adequately discuss it in much length, I do want to point out that the politics of love in Duncan's work (and its absent correlative in Levertov's) is historically significant. As my committee member Art Redding pointed out to me, the "free love" of anarchists like Duncan in the middle of the century was part of what separated the "hippies" and their attacks on normalcy from the staunch seriousness of Marxism, Leninism, and the kind of protest politics that Levertov seems to align herself with. Although, as I will demonstrate throughout this chapter, the differences between these two poets' politics is not so great.

² Comment by Jonathan Vantor (23/10/13): "I'm not sure if I buy the idea of literary criticism being emotionless: what about the endless pursuit of 'tone'? Granted, the language around tone is certainly not as formalized or specific, indicating that pinpointing how it works hasn't been an academic priority. But then again, what about Barthes' *Lover's Discourse*?"

patriarchal politic behind the fact that sentiment (characterized by the emotions of love, empathy, and care) is typically associated with the feminine, which leads scholarly work to ignore these emotions in favor of objectivity, thought, and reason.

It is this observation that leads Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in the final installment of their *Empire* trilogy, *Commonwealth* (2011), to observe that, in philosophy, theory, and even literary criticism, “[w]hat is missing is love” (179). Hardt and Negri claim that “[l]ove has been so charged with sentimentality that it seems hardly fit for philosophical and much less political discourse” (179). Instead, they assert that the normative assumption is that philosophers should “[l]eave it to the poets to speak of love” (179). Throughout his poetry and his prose, Duncan speaks of love incessantly, but not with the kind of lower-case-r romantic zeal associated with the poet. Rather, Duncan articulates a politics of love strikingly similar to the one Hardt and Negri discuss decades later. For Hardt and Negri, as for Duncan, “love is not, as it is often characterized, spontaneous or passive. It does not simply happen to us as if it were an event that mystically arrives from elsewhere. Instead, it is an action . . . planned and realized in common” (180). Also like Duncan, Hardt and Negri condemn an identitarian love (a love of the same, to borrow from Luce Irigaray), remarkably similar to Duncan’s condemnation of the contemporaneous gay-rights movement in “The Homosexual and Society.”³ Instead, Hardt and Negri advocate a politics of love that “composes singularities, like themes in a music store, not in

Response (18/11/13): “I tend to think that ‘tone’ and how a text conveys or expresses an emotion is quite different from affect. Sure, affect is garnering some good attention these days, but I think it’s valuable to note that the experimental text is not often considered for its affective merits in the same way as, say, a Dickens novel. Which is interesting because I also think that the experiment has a more direct affective relationship to the reader than its narrative/content based counterparts.”

³ In “The Homosexual and Society,” Duncan refutes an identitarian rights-based discourse, instead opting for the celebration of each individual’s “share in universal human experience” (45). In a footnote, he clearly links this sort of politics to his writing, arguing that “[t]he principal point is that the creative genius of a writer lies in his communication of personal experience as a communal experience” (45n5).

unity but as a network of social relations” (184). Thus, a politics of love would entail the search for similarities (as opposed to the differences sought out in an identitarian politics), and would privilege all singularities equally.

What is perhaps most important for Hardt and Negri is the fact that love both produces the common and functions as a part of it (xii). It is a physical force and a political action, but one that embraces flux, seeks alternatives, disrupts representation and expression, and engages the social in collective responsibility. Love is responsible to, and part of, the common; it does not rely on the binarism of individual and society, of self and other, but rather embraces the varied connections between individuals that exist exclusively in flux. Duncan, too, is interested in the idea of love as disorder, as demonstrated in “Such is the Sickness of Many a Good Thing”⁴ when he writes of “Eris⁵ in Eros / key and lock” (5-6), lamenting “I could not speak / the releasing / word” (7-9). “Eris,” the Greek goddess of strife and discords, features prominently in Duncan’s work. For him the instability of eris is necessary for a communal and anarchic eros. The *eris* in *eros* is something just beyond articulation, a kind of divinity (*charitas*) that expresses itself for Duncan as a natural order beyond our imposed order, and it results in the common (*communitas*). Duncan eventually sums up this definition of love in a letter to Denise Levertov, arguing that “Eros or Eris (that strife Heraklites has in mind, a striving for a higher order of things that casts existing orders into the aspect of disorder)” demand the sacrificing of identitarian markers (“30

⁴ While “Such is the Sickness” is not a part of the *Passages* series, its inclusion in *Bending the Bow* demonstrates that the relationship between *eros* and *eris* was a feature of Duncan’s writing at this point in his career. Moreover, Duncan’s repeated assertion that the weaving of *Passages* into other poems in *Bending the Bow* and *Ground Work* similarly assert that they cannot adequately be extracted from their surroundings. “[W]hat I aimed at,” he tells an interviewer, “is a weaving that would be at the same time loose enough” that they would be separate but tied to their context, even lamenting “how little I am able to break up my close weave” (*A Poet’s Mind* 92).

⁵ Comment by Andy Weaver (25/1/14): “As an aside, I think you’re going to have to discuss Duncan’s use of, and faith in, eris/Strife sooner or later. I think that it is a central part of Duncan’s anarchism, and would go hand in hand with the notion of ‘intervention’ that you very productively include.”

March, 1968” 607). This sacrifice is central to his poetry and poetics, which constitute a search for a commonality, for equality, and for an ethics of love that values each example not for its artistic, but its emotional value. In this politics of love, language is crucial. As Stephen Collis notes in his essay, “A Duncan Etude: Dante and Responsibility,” for Duncan, “language is the commons: we all have equal rights to enter there—permission to return to the common source” (n.p). Collis goes on to observe that for Duncan the language of poetry occupies an important place in the language of the common: “Poetry is a gift of the *givenness* of language and no poet holds property rights over it, but owes it his or her service and responsibility. Poetry is radically communal, and the modernist development of collage—the quoting poem parading its ‘reading-writing’—is one expression of this” (n.p). Thus Duncan, in his *Passages* series, moves freely from source text to his own, misquoting (either intentionally or unintentionally), paraphrasing, and refusing citation in order to foreground the fact that language cannot be owned. Despite the discourses of intellectual property, language is inherently communal. This communal approach is also a critique of self-interested individualism. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, Duncan also sees *Passages* as enacting a breaking of boundaries between the writing and the reading subjects, especially by way of a poetic common, implicitly suggesting that a “Self” is only one node in a multiplicity, opposing the liberal humanist monadic individual that suppresses as it divides and orders. In a common concerned with “the fulfilment of human potentialities,” this breaking of boundaries occurs in the interstices of language and love.

Anne Day Dewey, in her article “Creeley, Duncan, and the Uses of Abstraction,” makes clear the links between Duncan’s poetry, language, and love. Dewey postulates a “lovers’ common ‘language of daily life’” as “the creative centre from which cosmic order ‘expands,’ redefining the new natural order grounded in the lovers’ harmony” (106). This “private speech

community” reinvigorates language with love and with sameness that “gives language new meaning” (106). This appears to be largely an aesthetic choice until one considers Dewey’s claim that, for Duncan, “love is the source of change” (104), adding that “[t]his changing perception of language implies a shift in the conception of the public sphere that poetry addresses” (112). Thus it becomes extremely important that, in a footnote to “The Homosexual in Society,” Duncan argues that “[t]he principal point is that the creative genius of a writer lies in his [sic] communication of personal experience as a communal experience” (45). As the personal becomes communal, the poetic becomes political, inciting the reader to relinquish the identitarian politics of difference in favor of a new politics of empathy.

This rejection of identitarian politics is integral to Duncan’s poetics and politics of love. Michael Palmer sees it clearly enacted in Duncan’s work when he writes in the introduction to *Ground Work* that the “[f]orces formed within the Ego ... must be channelled toward the obliteration (or else possible overcoming) of that ‘I’ or self” (x). In “The Homosexual and Society” Duncan makes clear the link between this poetic choice and its political implications, writing that:

only one devotion can be held by a human being seeking a creative life and expression, and that is a devotion to human freedom, toward liberation of human love, human conflicts, human aspirations. To do this one must disown *all* the special groups (nations, churches, sexes, races) that would claim allegiance. (47)

Here, he makes reference to the aforementioned sacrifices he describes to Levertov. Even Duncan’s most overt claims for what we would call gay-rights do not fit into such an identitarian category; he is not particularly concerned with “rights” either, viewing them as another imposition onto the otherwise egalitarian natural order. This liberation is driven, more than

anything else, by love. “Love is dishonored,” he writes, “where sexual love between those of the same sex is despised; and where love is dishonored there is no public trust” (49). His poetry, and especially his poetry of erotic love, tends to shy away from the identitarian designation of “homosexual,” instead preferring to focus on the intersubjective connection of eroticism. In one of the most famous poems of the *Passages* series, “The Torso, Passages 18” (*Bending the Bow* 63), he even displays a deep skepticism for the term, following the third-line’s phrasing “Is he...” with the delayed and italicized “...*homosexual?*” nine lines later. The term “homosexual” designates a third-party voice (neither speaker nor beloved) who imposes the subject position on the lovers judgmentally. The lovers, however, are not concerned with naming. Instead, the speaker of the poem focuses on his desire to “pour forth my soul / his soul commingling” (14-5), eventually noting that in their erotic union⁶ they complicate (or perhaps collapse) the individualized subject positions required to be labeled “homosexual” so derisively. “Gathering me,” he tells his lover, “you gather / your Self” (51-2). Though the poem states defiantly in its penultimate line, “For my Other is not a woman but a man” (53), the identitarian label of “homosexual” is forfeited in favor of the “commingling” that defines love in the common.

By shifting the focus from the identity politics of the gay man in those gay-rights movements he condemns and towards the love itself (both the sexual love between members of the same sex and communal love for all individuals), Duncan enacts precisely the kind of politics of love that Hardt and Negri would later posit. “What we are looking for—and what counts in love—” they insist at the end of their chapter on love, “is the production of subjectivity and the encounter of singularities which compose new assemblages and constitute new forms of the common” (186). Ultimately, Duncan composes these new assemblages of love, just as the

⁶ I will return to this poem later in this chapter to discuss the importance of erotic attention. At this point, I am interested only in how the poem substitutes love for identity politics.

Passages series creates new assemblages as well: new assemblages of readers, of texts, and between the poems themselves. This communal love gets articulated, first and foremost, in Duncan's process of writing as first a reading, a process that attempts to link the practices of reading and writing as closely as possible. Duncan envisions his text as being situated in a discursive practice where language is held in common, and all texts are innately joined in "new assemblages" that articulate "new forms of the common." With the incessant and often troubling use of quotation, borrowing, and a kind of expropriation or "plagiarism"⁷ that litters *Passages*, Duncan argues that texts exist in bonds with each other, and that in this sharing they demonstrate the same communality and public love/trust that he articulates in his politics. I will examine this politics and poetics of communal love throughout, looking at the various ways it enacts itself in the *Passages* sequence, and how it gets altered in the work of Levertov, Duncan's contemporary.

In light of Duncan's approaches to active readership, we must then read Levertov's work as engaging an active readership, surely, but one that does so in a radically different way. For the most part, scholarship surrounding the well-publicized rift recorded in the correspondence

⁷ Comment by Andy Weaver (18/1/14): "I don't know about 'plagiarism.' I take your points in the footnote as completely valid... but, as you suggest, the term's entrenching of ownership is problematic (so I guess that problem is more fundamental to me than it is to you). I wonder if a term like 'expropriation' might work better? If we take Duncan at his word, he expects others to rework his poetry, and so Duncan's borrowing/stealing can also be viewed as a way of placing lost elements back into the intellectual commons, of resuscitating ideas/words that have been forgotten by readers and giving them new life."

Response (18/1/14): "I think expropriation is an excellent term for what Duncan does, but I also feel a personal desire to add it to plagiarism rather than remove the latter completely. I guess I just really like the idea of discussing plagiarism in a way that foregrounds how Duncan's work still directly contests contemporary intellectual property issues."

Addendum: The use of the term plagiarism in my work is inherently problematic because in order for there to be "plagiarism" there must also be concomitant ideas of intellectual property, copyright, and some designation of the *ownership* of language. This, of course, runs counter to Duncan's argument that language, and especially poetic language, is held in common and that we all, as readers and writers, have equal rights to it. I use the term still because it demonstrates the degree to which Duncan's project runs counter to the dominant ideologies of intellectual property and language rights of juridical discourses both when he wrote and when I do. I recognize that my use of the term can also be taken as entrenching the very system it critiques.

between Duncan and Levertov has set the two authors in opposing schools of political poetry: Duncan's enacts an individual freedom, whereas Levertov's prescribes a revolutionary mode of activism which privileges communal responsibility over individual freedom. I would like to reposition Levertov's poetry as one that necessarily enacts a communal politics that complements, rather than contradicts, Duncan's push for individual freedom. In order to do so, I would like to focus on the collection that truly marks Levertov's shift from the organic lyric poet of her earlier collections, to the stark realist politics of her Vietnam War era poems: *The Jacob's Ladder*, published in 1961.⁸ At this time, American troops stationed in Vietnam were increasing dramatically, but the war had not captured the attention of the American public in the way that it would in the mid- to late-sixties.⁹ For this reason, Levertov's political poems deal less with politics directly¹⁰ and instead enact a poetry of the communal that encourages her readers to be active in their engagement and specific in their perception of the world around them; this communality recalls, rather than rebukes, Duncan's own advocations. Levertov envisions this

⁸ Comment by Andy Weaver (26/1/14): "Dani, this is an interesting entry point into discussing Levertov, and I think the broad distinctions you make between Levertov's and Duncan's sensibilities is solid. I do wonder a bit, given the frame of the Duncan-Levertov controversy that you use as a hinge to move from Duncan into Levertov, that you chose *The Jacob's Ladder* as a crucial text. I remember Duncan being more or less fine with that book (and perhaps the next?), and not really criticizing Levertov until her late '60s books. My memory is always dodgy—am I wrong on that point? If so, then all is well—but if I'm right that Duncan and Levertov didn't really part poetic company until later, I think it might be problematic to suggest a split that isn't there at the time of *The Jacob's Ladder*. This is a concern that might be rendered moot merely by acknowledging and contextualizing your points more specifically. Is it because the obvious split isn't there yet that makes focusing on *The Jacob's Ladder* so important to your argument? Perhaps clarifying your stance in the first paragraph or two would help?"

Response (27/1/14): "My interest in *The Jacob's Ladder* is that it really sets up the paradox of self/perspective and dissolution in her work, and while it does predate the vast majority of Duncan's criticisms, I see it as, really, the foundation text for her mid-career work that angered Duncan so much."

⁹ America was preoccupied, instead, as Levertov's poetry often critiques, with the Camelot of the newly inaugurated Kennedy administration, and, by the time of *The Jacob's Ladder's* publication, the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion.

¹⁰ Save the important exception of "During the Eichmann Trial," which discusses the war crimes trial of former SS officer Adolf Eichmann.

common as one in the material, political world, but *also* and perhaps more importantly, one in the linguistic realm, and thus advocates the commonality of the poetic and literary imagination. Of course, it must be added that *The Jacob's Ladder* predates the vast majority of Duncan's criticisms of Levertov, so it is a bit unfair of me to use this particular collection in order to contradict Duncan's critiques. The reason that I find this collection to be the most appropriate site for my discussions of Levertov's politics is that it really sets up the paradox of self or perspective and the dissolution of the self that would become so central to her work. Though *The Jacob Ladder* predates the major rifts between the two poets, it sets the foundation for Levertov's midcareer work that angered Duncan so much. It also sets the tone of active, engaged readership, which remains the clearest similarity between the two.

A Common Readership

In "Relearning Denise Levertov's *Alphabet: War, Flesh, and the Intimacy of Otherness*," Lisa Narbeshuber argues that Levertov's theories of authorship are "[t]ypical of the Black Mountain orientation" in that "her poetry wants to engage in a direct dialogue with the outside world rather than withdraw from such a worldly world into a removed aesthetic sphere" (138). But, her poetry does not converse with its reader in the same manner as Duncan's palimpsestic *Passages*, or as Charles Olson's sweeping invitations in *The Maximus Poems*. Instead, while promoting conceptions of a political and a poetic common, the form of the organic lyric that Levertov constructs throughout her career (especially in *The Jacob's Ladder*) functions more as a Romantic lyric than a direct engagement with the reader. Marjorie Perloff notes this much in her article on the Duncan/Levertov correspondence when she writes that Levertov's wildly popular anti-war poem, "Tenebrae" (1972), does not adequately engage with her readership: "The poem leaves the reader no freedom to interpret." What Levertov hoped, instead of a

“freedom to interpret,” was that her poetry would affect her readers into more direct and specific attentiveness and engagement with the world around them.¹¹

Narbeshuber attributes this desire, in part at least, to the popularization of television, which Levertov viewed, contrary to many popular understandings of its role in the Vietnam war, as something that “severs a difficult reality from the senses” (133). While the media frenzy surrounding the American occupation of Vietnam had not yet begun at the time of *The Jacob’s Ladder*’s publication, we nonetheless see this call for worldly attentiveness in action in the collection right away. The collection begins with an epigraphic poem, “To The Reader,” in which Levertov encourages attention to the world surrounding the reader, outside the text. The last stanza of the short poem reads:

and as you read
the sea is turning its dark pages
turning
its dark pages. (7-10)

Here, Levertov aligns her poem (and by its epigraphic nature, the whole collection) with the external world, reminding the reader of his or her position in the common, even in the secluding act of reading a book of poems.

In fact, it is precisely this turn to the common or the collective on the political level that Levertov suggests Duncan’s politics of individual freedom sorely lacks. According to Perloff,

¹¹ Comment by Sean Braune (25/11/13): “So Perloff writes that ‘Tenebrae’ ‘leaves the reader no freedom to interpret.’ This claim has interesting political implications I think: namely, what is the difference between poetry and propaganda? When ‘freedom to interpret’ is removed, then the poem becomes propagandist because it has a direct message that becomes forced onto the reader. Part of what makes poetry such an effective postanarchist or anarchist medium is that it is open—poetry lives in a very broad commons (I think you imply this somewhere). The danger of delimiting interpretation is that poetry becomes a ‘sell,’ ‘message,’ or ‘slogan.’ I guess this has always been part of my problem with Levertov’s Vietnam War poems: they lose the anarchism of poetry and become political archaisms.”

Levertov says that Duncan's anarchic upbringing caused him to rely too much on individual freedom, and thus to "mistrust group action." Perloff goes on to quote Levertov as arguing that because of the radical and anarchic politics of his parents, Duncan "did not experience the comradeship, the recognition of apparent strangers as brothers and sisters" (SM 111-12 qtd in "Poetry, Politics" n.p.). Conversely, Levertov's Anglican upbringing has apparently prepared her for such collective political and poetic thinking. Dewey, in her article about the Duncan/Levertov correspondence, notes that this Christian approach to communality allows "[h]er poetry of the early 1960s [to] use[] the language of literature and tradition to frame epiphanic experience of the everyday, shifting inspiration from concrete objects to a community of literary kindred spirits" ("Poetic Authority" 114). In a turn that recalls Duncan's poetic common, "Levertov roots her imagination in a spirit world nourished by poetic tradition" (ibid). In this manner, Levertov employs the quotidian, and especially the colloquial, to embrace this linguistic conception of the common. Dewey goes on to write that

While leveling the hierarchy (although not abolishing the distinction) between poetic and colloquial diction, Levertov admits both as essential elements of her expression. As one in a continuum of individual utterances that establish consensual public meaning, poetry can engage colloquial idiom directly and transform it. (117)

In contrast to Duncan's critiques of Levertov in their correspondence, which I will detail momentarily, Dewey argues that her determined "embrace of group language represents not loss of [individual] freedom but a positive, mutual transformation of self and community" (117). This, too, is represented in the language of *The Jacob's Ladder* as early as the first poem following the epigraphic "To The Reader," a poem appropriately titled "A Common Ground." In

this poem, Levertov begins by foregrounding the unity implied. The first line reads: “To stand on common ground.” This thematic conceit is carried throughout, as in lines seventeen through twenty which read:

to eat and sweet
to be given, to be eaten
in common, by labourer
and hungry wanderer...

Throughout the collection this political, populist common is extended to the artistic imagination, albeit less explicitly, as in the direct address to a fictional “Homer da Vinci” (“The Part” 1). In *The Jacob’s Ladder*, commonality abounds.

Levertov’s work is also persistently interested in an authorial writing-self that navigates this rhizomatic common space, and this is something that many critics of her work have noted. Narbeshuber, for example, argues that Levertov’s work functions to “carefully rethink the nature of self and community, ambitiously attempting to mend the classic subject/object dualism, while simultaneously constructing a vision of a self able to think and act in the world” (133). This reliance on the self is perhaps most evident in Levertov’s later poetics pieces in which she often defers to a personal and even subjective relationship between the writing self and poetic form.

Her “On the Function of the Line” (1979), for example, contains the following passage:

Then the student poet can decide, or feel out, whether he or she wrote it down but read it right, or vice versa. That decision is a very *personal* one and has quite as much to do with the individual sensibility of the writer and the unique character of the experience embodied in the words of the poem, as with universally recognizable rationality—though that may play a part, too. (85, *emph. mine*)

Later in the same piece she argues that open or free poetic forms “*build unique contexts*” (86, *emph. Levertov’s*). In “A Poet’s View” (1984) she goes as far as to say that the construction of a clearly defined writing self is integral to an “honest artist,” writing that “an honest artist is, and needs to be, conscious of having a point of view, a philosophy or a constellation of opinions and beliefs which inform his or her work in some degree” (239). While this conception of an authorial presence might seem to run counter to a postanarchist reading and writing practice, it is valuable here insofar as it allows Levertov to put emphasis on affective reading strategies, “in order to make readers understand what is happening, really understand it, not just know *about* it but feel it” (“Poetry, Prophecy, Survival” 146, *emph. Levertov’s*). Nonetheless, this “self” immediately lends itself to a speaking *for* or *on behalf of* the other. While uncritical of this, Levertov herself notes it when she writes that this affective relationship with the reader “has the obvious functions of raising consciousness and articulating emotions for people who have not the gift of expression” (“Poetry, Prophecy, Survival” 144). Thus, it is unsurprising that the second person singular pronoun of “To The Reader” shifts later in the collection to the collective “we” in “The Tide” when Levertov writes “While we sleep” (1). But, we are also not shocked when, only a few lines later, the prescriptive poetic voice, with her clearly defined point of view, emerges in separation from the “we” when Levertov writes “I hear” (14). In the end, despite Levertov’s gestures toward the political and poetic common, the poet still envisions herself as hearing, and speaking, for those who do not have these “gifts.”

While *The Jacob’s Ladder*, a mid-career collection for Levertov, best demonstrates her relationship to a postanarchist literary theory, Duncan’s relationship to it can be best demonstrated by his later work, exemplified by the aforementioned *Passages* series. *Passages* seems to me to be the best example of the way Duncan’s politics of borrowing, of anarchism, of

active readership, of a refusal of integration, and of a politics and ethics of communal love. I say this especially because the series is, as Palmer writes, “perhaps the most radical example of his poetics” (x), most notably regarding Duncan’s use of allusion and intertext. The word Clément Oudart, in “Genreading and Underwriting: A Few Soundings and Probes into Duncan’s *Ground Work*,” uses to describe these *Passages* poems, “palimpsestic” (par. 6), is especially apt, with its connotations of rewriting, re-visioning, and expanding. While many of the other poems Duncan wrote throughout his career also contain similar allusions and quotations, the *Passages* poems are set apart because of the distinctly revisionist nature of the serial poems themselves. Seemingly aware of this, Duncan ends his poetics piece, “Some Notes on Notation,” by explaining the *Passages* series and why it must, necessarily, be set apart. He writes:

In *Passages* verses may be articulated into phrases or tesserae of utterances and silences leading to a series of possible sentences. As *Passages* themselves are but passages of a poem beyond that calls itself *Passages* and that is manifest only in the course of the books in which it appears ... phrases have both their own meaning and yet belong to the unfolding revelation of a Sentence beyond the work. (5)

The similarities between this poetic series and the singularities involved in the poststructuralism and postanarchism I have outlined in my introduction are clear; in each case, the singularities (poems or persons) “have their own meaning” and at the time belong to a greater commonality. It is the same politics of common, of love, that unites “*all humans*” in Duncan’s politics and that unites the poems of the *Passages* series. For him, the individual elements, and the connections that join them, are just as important as the assemblage as a whole because the individual elements are manifestations of the “whole.” Indeed, the only way to approach the whole is

through the individual part. This means that he is not particularly concerned with an end-product, which would present an image of “wholeness” that would be untrue. So, his interest shifts to process.

In terms of the *Passages* poems, this process is most clearly evident in the “reading-writing” that Duncan uses throughout. The process of reading through a vast array of original or source texts becomes evident in the poems, which Oudart insists we should read as emblems of a process rather than end-products: “The published poems,” he writes, “ought . . . to be read as notebooks, as a groundwork for an illusory Book to come” (par 55). An example of this reading-writing process is “The Concert, Passages 31 (Tribunals)” (*Ground Work* 15-31), a poem whose title puns on two important themes in the series: at once a public performance by many artists, and a suggestion of harmony or agreement. The performers in this concert are represented by the various allusions Duncan makes throughout, beginning almost immediately with a reworking of the concepts of Jakob Boehme. Duncan’s use of Boehme is sporadic, ranging from an allusion on line four to Boehme’s concept of “Salitter” (the essence of God), to a quotation that lasts from lines eight through eleven. As readers, we should be thankful for the fact that Duncan cites Boehme so we do not confuse the two voices, saving us from Oudart’s warning that “unwary critics [may] quote him when they are in fact unwittingly quoting Duncan quoting [someone else]” (par. 25). Instead, Duncan and Boehme write in concert.

“The Concert” also has its share of unquoted borrowings. The “MUST MUST MUST” on line fifty-six, and the “MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!” later (58-59), are from Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse.” While uncredited, these are easily identifiable due to Olson’s characteristic and confrontational capitalization and the way that Duncan attributes these words

to “the Poet” (57). More difficult to decipher,¹² though, are lines fifty-nine through sixty-three, and lines sixty-six through seventy, which are both quotations from Rudolf Karl Bultmann’s *Theology of the New Testament* (1955). Bultmann’s name does not appear anywhere in the poem, and Duncan’s choice to refer to him as “the scholar” does nothing to make clear the allusion (66). What is perhaps more interesting about this example, however, is the way it is rewritten. The changes are minimal: where the original text reads “songs and especially ecstatic speaking in tongues” (Bultmann 161), Duncan changes the “song” to the singular, and where Duncan places an ellipsis between “prayers” and “song,” only one word is actually removed, and this the word “and.” This kind of disrespect for the original source copy may, at first, be interpreted as irreverence, but it is precisely his politics of the commonality of language that enables him to work so freely with his source texts. If his reading-writing is valued as equal to its source text, if language is valued as common and thus never owned, then the manipulation of the source text, however minute, is an act of love. The collage of quotations and references is in concert, a “concerting” of multiples to eventually form a kind of whole (the poem, *Passages*, the larger Book that Duncan imagines but cannot complete). Additionally, the definite article, the fact that it is “*The Concert*,” signals a link to his spiritual understanding of a “Grand Collage,” or, as quoted above, a “Sentence beyond the work,” of which this poem is only one manifestation.

In “Transmissions (*Passages* 33)” (*Ground Work* 23), the quotations become even more difficult to decipher as polyvocality shifts to multilingualism. While a reader may be tempted to

¹² Comment by Andy Weaver (21/1/14): “You imply throughout the entry a slight annoyance or frustration with Duncan’s elusive allusions. I think that’s fair, but, at the same time, I think Duncan’s primary reason for including those allusions (and in the fashion he does) is because he is following the tenets of his poetics, meaning he is discovering what needs to be written as he writes, not before. In this sense, Duncan is always the first reader of his own writing (and much more so than that could be said about most authors)—there is an aspect of surprise or unknowing in Duncan’s act of composing, so his reading of his work is an active process. Along these lines, and following off of Oudart’s thoughts, Duncan doesn’t need to cite quotations for himself. So, although they are often frustrating for us as readers, it’s important to note that Duncan’s allusions aren’t intended as exclusionary, as, say, Pound meant his.”

dismiss these quotations, when one attempts to follow these “intertextual clues”—as Oudart called them—the content of these quotations proves integral both to the individual poems, and to the serial project as a whole. “Transmissions” begins with two lines of Greek, “ὄνομα βίος / ἔργον δέ θάνατος,” both uncredited and untranslated. The Greek is the famous line from Heraclitus, “Its name is life, its work is death.” The phrase is a play on words, where the “it” in question is a bow (as in, a bow and arrow), the Greek word for which is “βίος,” remarkably close to the term for life, “βίος, the only difference is an accent on the “o” (§48). The word for life needs only an accent to become a symbol of death, exposing the arbitrary nature of the signifier, the mutability of the signified, and the importance of connection and context. Duncan does not necessarily include these uncredited and untranslated passages in an exclusionary manner as we might expect from modernist allusions. Rather, as a quotation from Dante suggests in “Before the Judgement (*Passages* 35)” (*Groundwork* 32), the reader is told “*Guarda, guarda*” (7), that is, “watch, watch.” And, the importance of detail recurs in “Transmissions” when Duncan quotes Philo’s *On the Creation of the World* with the lines “*Under the graver’s hand / the minutest seal takes in / the contours of colossal figures*” (68-70). It’s not a test of literary history; Duncan writes for a reader to pay attention, and for himself to pay attention, too. The poems make manifest connections between and within texts that we (or he) may miss without careful attention to detail. And throughout his work, this attention to detail is closely aligned with (especially erotic) love.

In fact, if the reader does not maintain this attention to detail, much of a poem like “The Torso” is lost. The poem, unlike the *Passages* poems of *Ground Work*, maintains one thematic intertext, quoting Gaveston’s lines from Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II* throughout. As with the slight changes to Bultmann’s text, Duncan alters one of Marlowe’s lines slightly, changing

the poem's last line from the original, "the king, upon whose bosom let me die" (I.i.14), to "*the King upon whose bosom let me lie*" (54, *emph. Duncan's*). With one letter, Duncan overturns the death sentence for the homosexual, and emphasizes again the act of love over the subject position. This important change is only available to a reader with an eye for detail, and perhaps a cursory knowledge of the Marlowe (or, a willingness to follow the clue). This eye for detail is mimicked as the poem itself looks, moving its gaze gradually from one specific, singular body part to the next: "*the clavicle*" (20); "*the nipples*" (23); "*the navel*" (28); "*the pubic hair*" (31). The torso that is the poem's namesake is never represented in its entirety; it exists only, and can be *loved* only, as an assemblage and manifests itself through the particulars.

Images of singularities that form assemblages abound in the *Passages* poems. In "The Concert," Duncan writes that

the stars also
are and remain severe and distinct,
each being of the universe free to itself
having its own law (15-18)

The lawless, anarchic stars are "distinct" from each other, but are bound by sameness in the universe. Thus it is not surprising that when the Ego of the speaker encroaches on this image towards the end of the poem, his attempts to own or to take the magnificence of the stars is doomed to fail. The speaker bemoans his "man's share of the stars' // majesty [is] thwarted" (79-80). Similarly, "Transmissions" is filled with references to singularities and multitudes, exemplified by lines ninety-seven and ninety-eight which read: "Not one but many energies shape the field. / It is a vortex. It is a compost." The reappearance of the common Black Mountain term "field" here is important because it is shaped by those singular "energies" that

inhabit it; even the field is only an assemblage, reducible to parts but never really able to be disassembled. Similarly, the likely reference to Pound and Lewis via Vorticism (the vortex) brings another reading of the “field” into play and forges another connection. It should come as no surprise that the Ego in “Transmissions” suffers the same pitfalls of the Ego in “The Concert”; it attempts an appearance on line thirty, when Duncan writes of “the ‘I’ passing into sight.” The personal pronoun loses stability as it is reduced to a singularity in the assemblage of “sight,” but also because the word “sight” transforms the upper-case “I” into the “eye” which can see the singular only as a part of a larger field of multiplicity.

The materiality of language also plays an important role in this politics of love. Duncan sees individual words as separate entities, operating as the singular operates in relation to the multiple. He makes this clear in “The Concert” when he writes that “each / ‘word’ [is] a severd distinct thing” (54-55). A similar argument is suggested by the disjunctive form of the opening and closing sections of “The Fire, Passages 13” (*Bending the Bow* 40-5), where individual words are literally shown connected but isolated from each other. The lines carry no narrative or even syntactical function, but rather present the image of a seaside landscape, and an important human intervention into it:

jump	stone	hand	leaf	shadow	sun
day	plash	coin	light	downstream	fish
first	loosen	under	boat	harbor	circle
old	earth	bronze	dark	wall	waver
new	smell	purl	close	wet	green

Duncan's work never "contrive[s]" to do such a justice—he acknowledges throughout that this is impossible. Instead, *Passages* tries to capture this mystical whole in parts, to stress connection throughout, and to value (or love) each incarnation equally. The serial poem is, for Duncan, an act of love, both poetic and political. Its statement is that we can only understand the world through its bits and pieces, and so we must value those pieces. Duncan's reading-writing, re-writing, misquotation, and borrowing show that his poetry works in this same way: he can only understand and communicate this greater poem in these small parts. Thus every small part deserves inclusion.¹³

(Dis)Integration and Defamiliarization

When I write about Duncan's assertion, in "Some Notes on Notation," that the poems in the *Passages* series "are but passages of a poem beyond that calls itself *Passages*" and that they ultimately "belong to the unfolding revelation of a Sentence beyond the work" (5), I do not mean to suggest that these poems, while dispersed throughout the *Ground Work* and *Bending the Bow* collections, unite into a larger textual whole. In fact, to suggest such a thing would do a great disservice to Duncan's poetics at large, wherein, in terms of both authorial subjectivity and textual production, Duncan was vehemently opposed to such visions of unity or integration. He makes this clear in many interviews. For example, in an interview for *The Sullen Art* in 1960, Duncan explains that his interest in the multiple is rooted in this discomfort with integration and unity; he says, "since I'm quite the opposite of what would be called an integrated personality (I

¹³ At this point, a note on Duncan's mysticism seems necessary, in that his understanding of the relationship between a singular part and an inarticulable whole are directly related to his understanding of an incomprehensible divine order of which we are only a part. For Duncan, the production of a poem was one articulation of this relationship between the individual and the divine order. "Our consciousness," he writes, "and the poem as a supreme effort of consciousness, comes in a dancing organization between personal and cosmic identity" ("Towards" 78). While I do not discuss it in depth here, I do want to point to Ross Hair's recent article, "Fallen Love: Eros and Ta'wl in the Poetry of Robert Duncan," which does some excellent work in connecting this mysticism Duncan's concept of eros.

dislike personality and I dislike integration), I tend to cultivate—not a disintegration, because that’s a part of the same subject as integration—call it a multiphasic possibility” (9). Similarly, his “Naropa Institute Interview” weaves this opposition to an integrated or unified personality (or subjectivity) with an opposition to a unified or integrated text by arguing that when a poem is produced in a manner that leaves itself open to the multiple, we (as writers and as readers) “disappear in the poem” (51). For Duncan, the unintegrated or multiphasic text is necessarily political in its desire to “disappear” (but not to “disintegrate”) the individualized self, as well as the monadic text. What all of this means is that when Duncan refers to his work as a part of a larger “Sentence” or an external Book called “*Passages*,” what he is really referring to is a larger project that he can never even articulate, let alone complete. The suggestion is that Duncan’s work is a part of a larger whole, Grand Collage of Literature in which his entire oeuvre is only one small part. He also suggests that there is a larger Poetry that all writing will never exhaust or capture in its entirety. In a Yale interview, he remarks: “I do feel I’m working on a very large poetic and that it never gets stated” (*A Poet’s Mind* 20). The *Passages* series is an attempt to articulate this inarticulable larger poetics, and thus is free from the boundaries that would otherwise govern a project that prioritized consistency, integration, and unity.

Duncan posits the *Passages* poems as the primary site of his articulation of this larger poetics, arguing that they seem to exist elsewhere, and that they come into being by way of his producing them through an apparently infinite process of reading, writing, rereading, and recontextualizing insofar as he re-presents what he has already read. He discusses this sequence most candidly in an interview for *Unmuzzled OX*, wherein he argues that *Passages* serves as a “test point” for this larger poetics “in which, theoretically, everything can coexist. It doesn’t have any boundaries supposedly” (86). Duncan describes the process of writing a *Passages* poem as

entering into the field¹⁴ of *Passages* by way of writing, which, for him, is an entirely unplanned experience. As he asserts in the same interview: “when I return to ‘Passages’ I find out what’s going on in it. The poem’s dependent, in the first place, on a particular tone from which I recognize that ‘Passages’ is ‘on.’ I don’t sit down and say, ‘Now I’m going to write a Passage’” (91). The seemingly spontaneous nature of the production of a *Passages* poem signals two important things about the series: first, that the poems gesture towards this larger poetics; second, that they cannot possibly complete it. What they share in their serial relationship to each other is tonal (and thus formal) rather than thematic. Duncan’s discussion of the series in the *Unmuzzled OX* interview provokes interviewer Howard Mesch to ask why the poems, then, are not united, at least, into their own collection. Duncan’s response seems to summarize the discussion rather well: “But they’re not in a book of their own any more than I’m in a world of my own. ... So, in this sense, they’re not part of a great poem at all. They’re part of a tapestry” (91-2).

It is entirely fitting that early on the sequence—the second poem named as part of the *Passages* series—takes up this image of the tapestry, and aligns the poet with the weaver at his/her¹⁵ loom. “At the Loom (Passages 2)” (*Bending the Bow* 9 – 10), uses the image of the tapestry as a metapoetic device; in this poem, the poet as weaver is more concerned with the loom itself, and the process of the weaving, than with the image constructed. While Duncan does take a moment at the beginning of the poem to note the “luminous soft threads” (9), the bulk of the poem is concerned with the “back of the images, the few cords that bind / meaning in the

¹⁴ The use of the term “field” here is loaded, as the term carries with it important connotations of Duncan’s method of “composition by field.” I use it to denote a space, but also hope that it carries Duncanian echoes.

¹⁵ Because I have privileged the author’s own voice throughout this chapter, from this point I will use the masculine pronoun to discuss the figure of the artist in Duncan’s work, and in this way, to align this figure with him. I acknowledge that rhetoric and brevity are taking the place of gender neutrality here.

word-flow” (12-3). Later in the poem, Duncan foregrounds this interest in process rather than end-product, arguing that “art shall never be free of that forge, / that loom, that lyre—” (26-7), and that these tools are more central than “the fire, the images, the voice” (28), which are secondary conduits, but ones that are necessary to bridge the gap between art’s meaning and its form. Tapestry, in this vein, refuses integration in the way that other media, for example painting, do not.¹⁶

The image of the tapestry is brought to the fore in this poem by way of Duncan’s allusion of George Gascoigne’s “The Complaint of the Green Knight” (*Posies*, 1575). Duncan’s intertext spans three lines: “*O weaver, weaver work no more, / Gascoyne is quoted: / ‘thy warp hath done me wrong’*” (42-44). The lines describe a scene in Gascoigne’s original, in which the Green Knight bemoans his fate in the form of fabric:

The fatal sisters three which spun my slender twine
 Knew well how rotten was the yarn from whence they drew their line
 [...]
 Yet must I wrap always therein my bones and body both,
 And wear it out at length, which lasteth but too long.
 O weaver, weaver, work no more; thy warp hath done me wrong. (21-29)

The “warp,” the threads that form the basic structure or netting on which the tapestry is woven, the “threads twisted for strength” that Duncan refers to (40), is blamed for the “wrongness” of the “tapestry” of the Green Knight’s life. For Duncan, the warp is the underlying structural

¹⁶ Painting, for Duncan, is a process of integration in a way that weaving is not. In “The Fire (Passages 13),” also in *Bending the Bow*, he writes: “He [Piero di Cosimo] inherits the *sfumato* of Leonardo da Vinci — / there is a softening of outline, his color fuses” (30-1). It might also be worth noting that his partner, Jess’s, collage artworks similarly resist integration in the way that painting seems to court it.

element that allows for the joining together of the separate threads of a tapestry. As the etymological lists he includes indicate, “warp, *wearp*, *varp*: ‘cast of a net, a laying of eggs’ / from **warp* ‘to throw’” (38-9), the warp is also a netting that is designed to collect and to gather. The poem begins, on line three, with a direct reference to Ezra Pound, and to the *Cantos* specifically, as a similar kind of netting or warp, the “twisted sinews underlying the work” (11), with Duncan functioning as a “shuttle among / set strings of the music” (5-6). Duncan relishes the sound of the shuttle’s movement, “the clack of the shuttle flying / forward and back forward and / back” (35-7), a musicality that makes his work transient in contrast to the timeless tome Pound envisioned for the *Cantos*. In *Passages*, the process of “reading to ourselves” or “reading aloud / sounding the music” (30-1) destabilizes “the stuff” (32) that eventually “vanishes upon the air, / line after line thrown” (33-4). It is a way of (dis)integrating the tight netting of Pound, allowing Duncan to be able to include and use Pound’s work despite those elements of Pound’s work that he found problematic.

It is also significant that “At the Loom” ends with a condemnation of the state and of a nationalist discourse in general:

each side
 facing its foe for the sake of
 the alliance,
 allegiance, the legion, that the
 vow that makes a nation
 one body not be broken.

Yet, it is all, we know, a *mêlée*

a medley of mistaken themes (58-65)

This characterization of the nation as “mêlée” is loaded, denoting at once the violence of close combat and the theme of mixture or “medley” that fits in squarely with this issue of unintegration. As Andy Weaver also pointed out to me,¹⁷ a lesser, older definition of “mêlée” as mixture, “A confusion, jumble; a medley, a mixture” (*OED*), links the terms of *mêlée* and medley. Even more fitting is the fact that an obsolete meaning for the word “medley” is “[a] type of cloth made of wools dyed (freq. in different shades or colours) and mixed before being spun” (*OED*), echoing the image of the tapestry. So, writing is both a weaving, gathering together disparate parts, and a battle, allowing these parts to exist as separate and in conflict, or *eris*. All of this is summarized by the image of Achilles’s shield at the poem’s end, an impossible ekphrasis meant for battle but praised as craft and art. “At the Loom” functions as a critique of allegiance and of imposed organization and this critique inevitably ties to his anarchism.

Evidently, Duncan’s work was much more affected by the rise of poststructural ideas about politics and integration than Levertov’s. This, too, is a contentious claim, and one that contradicts much of the scholarship surrounding Levertov’s work. In fact, owing to her relationship with Black Mountain, and to the work of many of her other contemporaries, Levertov’s work is often uncritically accepted as postmodern. Perloff allows Levertov’s defining

¹⁷ Comment by Andy Weaver (24/1/14): “I’m not sure of your interpretation of the section describing the battle, ending in a *mêlée*. Especially given the line that follows your quotation (‘a medley of mistaken themes’), Duncan seems to be at least partially using ‘*mêlée*’ in the sense of ‘mixture,’ rather than ‘confused battle.’ I think that the punning he uses here actually moves the discussion away from a literal battle and back towards weaving (as a metaphor for creativity): an obsolete meaning for ‘medley’ is ‘A type of cloth made of wools dyed (freq. in different shades or colours) and mixed before being spun’ (*OED*), and a lesser, older definition of ‘*mêlée*’ also pushes the word in this direction: ‘A confusion, jumble; a medley, a mixture’ (*OED*). So, then, it is possible to read the ending as about a battle, but also as a discussion of weaving/life/creativity as metaphorical battle/struggle/*eris*. A final suggestion that the battle alludes at least partially to creativity is the final image of the poem, that of Achilles’s shield, which is a magnificent example of artistry, created by Hephaestus and containing the world in all its complexity (see *The Iliad*, the last few pages of “Book 18”). That reading doesn’t discount or disprove your interpretation, but it does make it a lot richer, I think. (Don’t forget that, while Duncan was a pacifist and was absolutely against physical violence, his anarchism also required conflict/strife (‘*eris*’) in order to keep things from reifying.)”

“agitprop” to admit her to the postmodern school, and leaves it at that. Donna Hollenberg accepts Levertov as postmodern particularly because her work can be read clearly through Alicia Ostriker’s conception of the “postmodern witness” (520). Lisa Narbeshuber offers some deliberation, arguing ultimately that while postmodern in essence, Levertov’s work fits uneasily into the school as a whole. She writes that “Levertov’s poetry has never fallen into either the playfully anti-referential postmodern stream best represented by Jacques Derrida or the mournful postmodern stream best represented by [Jean] Baudrillard” (135). What I would like to argue is that Levertov’s work does, indeed, fall into postmodernism in some counts, particularly in her treatment of the defamiliarization of language, her embracing of polyvocality, and her conception of organic form as rhizomatic. But, these traits are overshadowed by her opposition to the radical politics and poetics of LANGUAGE poetry (which often surfaces in her correspondence with Duncan) and her ultimate belief in a divine truth innate in everything, up to and including language. Ultimately, while often pulled towards a postmodern tradition, Levertov’s work, especially in *The Jacob’s Ladder*, necessarily falls victim to a universalizing truth that betrays her organic poetics.

To begin, I would like to touch on Levertov’s opposition to the radical poetics of LANGUAGE poetry, which were crucial to Duncan’s progression as a poet.¹⁸ Levertov’s distaste for LANGUAGE poetry seems to stem from their radical interest in the individualized utterance and the materiality of language, which moves poetic language too far from its function as expressive and meaningful. Even when Levertov’s work dwells on materiality and defamiliarizes

¹⁸ Levertov’s opposition to the poetics of LANGUAGE poetry are well-documented, especially in the two popular biographies (Hollenberg’s and Greene’s) mentioned above. Mark Jarman goes as far as to suggest, in his review of both biographies for *The Hudson Review*, that her disagreement with the stylized LANGUAGE tradition, which in her view “valued style over content” (n.p.), is in part responsible for her current relative obscurity. I also do not mean to suggest that Duncan’s relationship with the LANGUAGE tradition is uncomplicated.

language—an important feature of her work, actually, which I will discuss in more depth in the paragraphs that follow—she is always primarily interested in the meaningful and metaphorical potentials of the lyric. In *The Jacob's Ladder*, this is perhaps best demonstrated by the poem “The Necessity” (56), which courts a LANGUAGE poetry investigation of defamiliarization only to return to more “meaningful” and more traditionally lyric-poetic pursuits. The poem opens with the dismantling of the clichés of love and nature poetry, arguing that “From love one takes / **petal to rock and blessed**” (1-2, emph. Levertov’s), eventually leading “away towards / **descend**” (3-4, emph. Levertov’s). The bolded words are defamiliarized from their traditional uses in lyric poetry, and instead Levertov seems to hold these words responsible for their progressive abstraction, their ability to distance poetry from its access to love. The poem ends with the saving assertion that despite our formalization and our focus on materiality, “all we have led away returns to us” (24). That is, although the poem does admit that “each part / of speech [is] a spark” (17-8) a moment of form and flourish, these parts are also “awaiting redemption” (19), a divination that is a return to the representational function that is more meaningful, more thoughtful, and ultimately, more politically effective. For Hollenberg, this turn to narrative and the expressively meaningful is “analogous to Levertov’s rejection of the captious wit of LANGUAGE poetry, notwithstanding the related political goals of its advocates” (“Ekphrasis” 523). While Levertov may have felt a political affiliation with the ultimate goals of the LANGUAGE tradition, she felt there was a dramatic formal divide between her work and theirs.

Keith Norris, in “Openmouthed in the Temple of Life: Denise Levertov and the Postmodern Lyric,” characterizes this divide as one of safety rather than disturbance. That is, while LANGUAGE poetry sought to defamiliarize and disturb language from its quotidian function, Levertov sought an attentive, responsible space from which her poetry could speak.

Norris explains it in this way:

Language poetry is, in a sense, the extreme example of a connection with the disturbing multitude of images present in the contemporary world; Levertov asserts a poetry that not only can recognize and reproduce that miscellany with a joyous intensity, but can also achieve a safe place from which to critique such a world. (344)

It is precisely this concern that Hollenberg echoes when she writes that Levertov “deplored the prevalence of fracture and obliquity as poetic techniques in contemporary poetry” (530). The radical postmodernism of LANGUAGE poetry, and the other more radical avant-garde movements at the time, provokes Levertov to distance herself from the formal poetics of the other Black Mountain poets (of Olson and Duncan, less so of Creeley), and instigates a return to what Hollenberg almost uncritically terms a return to an “*ut picture poesis*” where “art is prized less as an imitation of reality ... than as an expression of the human spirit” (532). In a move that gestures toward her affinity for an authorial, egoic writing-self, Levertov thus detaches herself from the high-modernists and her contemporaries who “stress the impersonality of art. Instead, she makes art an analogue of the artist it expresses, and encourages our identification with the artist’s point of view” (533). Despite these objections, Levertov’s organic lyric is often concerned with the defamiliarization of language and its (often natural) materiality.

Many critics note Levertov’s defamiliarization, but often do so as a means to prove an activist, political end. This is the case, for example, with Narbeshuber when she observes that, “[a]s with the poetry of Robert Duncan or Charles Olson, language itself is a particularly charged object that can be re-seen and that can open up a *defamiliarized* (fresh) vision of the world, one not reduced to cliché, packaged images, or sound bytes” (135). While *The Jacob’s Ladder* is a

collection that is less concerned with agitprop politics than her later work, examples of this defamiliarization abound, and most are centred on the linguistic realm itself, and on language's ability to occasion non-referential meaning, as in "A Common Ground" when she writes of "a language / excelling itself to be itself" ("Part iii" 9-10). But the whole concept of agitprop, or of the organic lyric, depends on language's referential function, and various examples of Levertov's defamiliarization demonstrate that she is actually extremely skeptical of its effectiveness. Unsurprisingly, in light of Levertov's ecological and environmental affinities, these examples often defer to the "language" of the natural world as inadequate to support a poetic language that requires referential meaning in order to remain valuable. For example, the first stanza of "Six Variations: iii" reads:

Shlup, shlup, the dog
 as it laps up water
 makes intelligent
 music, resting
 now and then to
 take breath in irregular
 measure. (1-8)

The dog's sounds in the water may produce "intelligent / music," but its "irregular / measure" is not innately meaningful as Mac Low understood animal sounds to be. Instead, it remains a nonsensical "Shlup" requiring our attention, perhaps, but not inviting the reception of expression. Instead, it is our language that must gesture towards the meaningless sounds of the natural, as evidenced by "Matins" in which Levertov writes:

The cow's breath

not forgotten in the mist, in the
 words. Yes
 verisimilitude draws up
 heat in us, (“Matins: iv” 3-7)

So, cow’s breath inflects language, but it is up to the poet to generate verisimilitude. For Levertov, affect is produced through mimesis and in order for mimesis to function as affective language must return to the narrative function from which LANGUAGE would distance it.

Norris notes that Levertov’s organic lyric is postmodern “in its ability to move quickly from one perception, or anecdotal narrative we might say, to another, all the while crossing great gaps of meaning, and coming to understanding in how we cross those gaps” (346). Levertov’s parataxis is centrally the juxtaposition of multiple voices, multiple irreconcilable perspectives. The hallmark of postmodernism, polyvocality is present in Levertov insofar as various voices are represented (including the cow’s), but what is inarguable is that her poetry reifies one viewpoint, the author’s, as powerful and integral to the affective meaning-making of the poem. These variant viewpoints are necessarily linked in Levertov’s work to a divine truth, even if, as Norris attempts to argue, the “truth isn’t stated here, but is the process itself” (346). To be sure, the truth is unapproachable and fragmented, but as with her oppositions to LANGUAGE poetry, this fragmentation of the truth is regrettable. As the postmodern turns to the material conditions of linguistic production and prefers the concrete image to the abstraction, it fragments the truth, a fact that Levertov laments in her own work. We can see this clearly in *The Jacob’s Ladder* when she observes:

Alright.
 It’s true.

Nothing.

is ever enough. Images

split the truth

in fractions. (“A Sequence: iii” 11-16)

Levertov attempts to return language to this divine function, where the materiality of language gives way to a more meaningful embodiment: “Cold, fresh, deep, I feel the word ‘water’ / spelled in my left palm” (“The Well” 38-9).

Nevertheless, the critics that I have mentioned maintain that Levertov’s gestures towards the postmodern solidify her position as a postmodern poet. At the risk of sounding exclusionary, I cannot help but disagree. I cannot help but wonder if, as Norris maintains, Levertov’s “organicism isn’t a form, but a constantly evolving formation” (346), a move that recalls the rhizome of delezoguattarian thought, then what are we to make of lines such as “The poem ascends” (20), from the collection’s titular poem? The ascension of the poem is a move beyond materiality and fragmentation, and a move towards an external, divine truth, as opposed to the “**descend**[ing]” abstractions in the example from “The Necessity” quoted above. Norris concludes that “[i]n Levertov’s theory we are individually responsible for pursuing the universal, not particularly responsible for the individuation of accepted universal truths” (351-2). Where scholars have tended to see saving grace in this somewhat individualized realization of the universal, Levertov’s representations of it are no less universalizing than the Romantic tradition she prizes. When she writes “I saw / not what the almost abstract / / tiles held” but instead “a shadow of what / might be seen there if mind and heart / gave themselves to meditation” (“A Letter to William Kinter of Muhlenberg” 3-5, 7-9), she implies not an individuated truth, but a

Platonic one. Yes, it is external and perhaps even in flux, but it remains a divine and divined truth that the poet has prime access to, and one that art cannot capture, but should strive to do so.

The question of (dis)integration and defamiliarization in these texts is, in the end, a question of whole and of part, another example of the ways that Duncan and Levertov have been positioned as oppositional when, in actuality, their work articulates two important facets of a larger whole that neither fully develops on his/her own. That is, Duncan's preoccupation with disintegration and the singular suggests, above all, that we cannot and should not attempt to experience the whole (the Sentence, the Book to come). Instead, we act as weavers, moving our singular stories along a much larger loom than we could ever envision. Levertov, on the other hand, suggests that a divine, external truth is available to us in parts (individuated shadows accessed by the meditative mind). Through language, which is itself always part (momentary sparks) the poet gestures towards this greater whole or truth, and through language the reader can connect with (but never fully understand) this external truth. These are two slightly variant views of the same tension: a Platonic understanding of whole and part enmeshed with a postmodern skepticism of truth and wholeness. Though Duncan's radicalism never lets him associate his Sentence or Book with a truth, Levertov's assertion that our understanding of the "truth" is always in fractions is at least as tentative. Once again, the distance between their politics and their poetics is not so vast as either poet may have claimed.

Duncan, Levertov, and the Writing Self

While previously I dealt with Duncan's refusal of integration in terms of an integrated or cohesive text, he also clearly opposed integration in terms of selfhood or subjectivity.¹⁹ When he

¹⁹ Comment by Andy Weaver (25/1/14): "I don't know how helpful or relevant this point is, but the notions you're drawing out of Duncan seem really similar to Fred Wah's concept of 'synchronous foreignicity,' which he works through in several essays in *Faking It*. I suspect that Wah, as a fan and 'early adopter' of Duncan/Black Mountain

says in *The Sullen Art* interview that he is the “opposite of what would be called an integrated personality” (9), he also refuses a monadic conception of the self and its relationship to authorship; this fraught relationship with authorial power is made manifest in what Eric Keenaghan terms Duncan’s “radical humanism” (109). This, too, is expressed uniquely in *Passages*, which he describes as a form of writing that allows him to “lose [him]self in the hearing of the voice of the work itself” (“The Self in Postmodern Poetry” 227), and thus to oppose what he terms a “cult of American individualism” (226). Nowhere does Duncan grapple with notions of “the self” as freely as in the *Passages* series, and his complicated relationship between self and other therein must first be understood as emerging from an already complicated political climate.

Keenaghan makes this political climate the primary focus of his essay, “Robert Duncan’s Radical Humanism; or, On the Crises of Reading and Falling in Love.” He argues that Duncan’s work “implicitly critiques the midcentury’s new paradigmatic understanding of ‘the human’” ushered in by the United Nations’ adoption in 1948 of the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (110). While this is widely held to be a move in the progressive direction of global responsibility, Keenaghan argues, alongside many critics of contemporary (neo)liberalism, that the document is inherently hegemonic; “‘hegemonic’ because it depends on, and promulgates, a liberalist tradition that posits the free and sovereign individual as the basic political unit” (110). While this, on its own, does not necessarily read as damaging, one must also consider that it is precisely this conception of the “free and sovereign individual” that postanarchism works against in its interest in connection rather than separation. In other words, as Keenaghan goes on to demonstrate, the monadic self is understood as an “autonomous, liberal subject [that] result[s] in

poetics, would see his concept allied to Duncan’s notion of subjectivity (though Duncan doesn’t really deal with race, which is why Wah’s ideas are so helpful).”

competitive nationalism, ethnic conflict, and factionalist pluralisms based on identity politics” (111), which stands in stark contrast to Duncan’s politics of love and communal responsibility, especially one that is markedly anti-Statist. Instead, writing under “this new epoch of the human” (Keenaghan 120), Duncan insists that these notions of “rights” are attempts to impose an external order upon what is already inherently ordered in the natural world. Put explicitly, Keenaghan writes that, for Duncan, “rights-bearing subjects are constructed; no a priori human person with secured natural rights exists” (121).

What does this mean for Duncan’s complicated relationship with authorial power and the persona of the poet? For Keenaghan, Duncan’s writing is a process through which he is able to separate himself, in some form, from his political subjectivity. “Poetic composition,” he writes, “is not a willful self-expression; rather, it separates the poet from his personality, from what makes him socially recognizable” (112). For Weaver, Duncan’s poetic composition is a process through which the poet opens the self to external influence: “In order to be responsive to [the] organic order flowing through all creation,” he argues, “the individual must open herself to the influence of others but also to the underlying order of language itself” (“Promoting” 84). And yet, as Graham Lyons is quick to note, no matter how critical Duncan is of the self and the notions of authorial power, he cannot ever fully escape the writing subject that is, despite philosophical arguments to the contrary, nonetheless a separate being in the world by virtue of a literal body, of skin. He argues, instead, that “the structure of *Passages* ... simultaneously saps and reinscribes authorial power: it gives him a say in the interaction of his corpus, if only to express what might seem to be vague equivocations (or productive contradictions?)” (101). Lyons argues that these “vague equivocations” of the issue of selfhood arise because his deferral of the self, in poetics pieces such as “The Self in Postmodern Poetry,” collected in *Fictive*

Certainties, do not adequately account for some fundamental questions of authorial choice: “Who is making these choices? Who decides (‘selects’) when the poems begin and end, what gives them ‘consistency’?” (Lyons 101). Duncan’s abdications of the power of the authorial position can only ever be partial, despite his arguments to the contrary.

When Lyons catalogues these oppositional questions against Duncan’s conception of a self in the *Passages* series, he is directly confronting the issues taken up in “The Self in Postmodern Poetry,” where Duncan characterizes the series as one in which these notions of the monadic self are sacrificed in the name of the larger inarticulable Passage beyond. As I have quoted briefly above, Duncan discusses *Passages* as “a work in which [he] seek[s] to lose [him]self in the hearing of the voice of the work itself, a work not of personality or oneself but of structures and passages” (227). Lyons takes exception, arguing that the forfeit of the “self” cannot adequately account for the particularities of the text’s production. However, it is integral to note that Duncan does not argue that this loss of “self” in *Passages* is complete or permanent. Rather, he demands a separation of the “self from Self” (230). For Duncan, the “self” is socially and politically constructed, and as such it is an example of the anti-communal, anti-anarchist imposition of order upon natural beings. Conversely, the “Self” is open, a gesture towards a larger ontological and teleological conception of the individual as a single node in a larger connectivity. If the distance between these two terms (“self” and “Self”) seems unclear, it is because Duncan never explicitly or clearly differentiates between the terms himself. My understanding of it is that the socially constructed nature of the self is an imposition designed to create isolated individuals. The Self, on the other hand, is more difficult to describe, largely because it is, for Duncan, both mystical and impossible to contain. In clarification, he writes: “One of the possibilities or potentialities kept alive for me (in the open question, ‘Who is the “I”

of “Passages”?) derives from the “Self” proposed by Vedanta ... and Jungian depth psychology. In what ‘Voice’ or ‘Mode’ or ‘Mind’ it is written, is very close to this ‘Self’” (230). Much like the Jungian collective unconscious, or radical understanding of self-realization suggested by Vedantic philosophy, the “Self” achieves openness precisely through its refusal of closure. The socially constructed self as anti-communal may, at first, appear to be a contradiction, but for Duncan it is absolutely not. Instead, the “self” is constantly written-upon by the codes of the social, and is thus the public manifestation of an external Self that—by remaining unknowable, undefinable, and open—always remains partially detached from the codification of social institutions. If the social closes off individual selves, the communal has the capacity to resist closure and develop an open Self.

Closure is one particularly significant feature of the traditional text that reinscribes traditional notions of authorial power and monadic selfhood. The experimental text resists closure in favor of an open-endedness that allows for radical reconceptions of the self as infinite and interconnected. Duncan’s disinterest in integration is part and parcel with this refusal of closure. I have already detailed a number of examples from the *Passages* poems that advocate for a refusal of the closed and separated, but Duncan also approached the materiality of print culture with a similar refusal. Consider this brief passage from Duncan’s “A Prospectus for the Prepublication Issue of ‘Ground Work,’” previously unpublished until its 2011 appearance in *(Re): Working the Ground: Essays on the Late Writings of Robert Duncan*: “GROUND WORK is to be unfinished copy, immediate copy—having no middle men between the reader and the writer” (17). By avoiding the “middle man” of the publishing house, Duncan viewed this early, prepublication-copy of *Ground Work* as a more direct address to the reader, in which errors and departures from printing convention open up that relationship to new possibilities. This passage

is also clearly indicative of Duncan's well-documented distaste for publishers,²⁰ which is the reason for the nearly fifteen-year gap between the publication of *Bending the Bow* (1968) and the first volume of *Ground Work* (1984) (there were, of course, a number of chapbooks in the interim). Through this flawed but more immediate communication, Duncan sees his poetry as enacting a breaking of boundaries between the writing and the reading subjects, suggesting a "Self" that is only a node in a multiplicity, rather than the liberalist and humanist conception of the monadic individual that suppresses as it divides and orders.

Similarly, Levertov's conception of a poetic writing-self behind her poetry is integral to both the aesthetic and political dimensions of her work, but she approaches this issue rather differently than Duncan. In terms of a postanarchist reading practice, Levertov's reliance on a seemingly monadic idea of the authorial self is one that, in many ways, runs counter to the politics of fragmented and illusory selves that was enacted in the poetries of Duncan, Cage, and Mac Low. In the process of reading and writing through *The Jacob's Ladder*, I often struggled with Levertov's reliance on this distinctly *not* postanarchist or poststructuralist notion of selfhood, and found myself siding occasionally with Duncan's critiques of her idea of a closed self. In a letter dated June 1968, Duncan writes to her that he sees in her political poetry a giving over to a "righteous Conscience—what Freudians call the Super Ego, that does not caution but sweeps outside all reservations." And yet, as many critics of her work have noted, there is still something redeemable about Levertov's intensely personal, self-driven poetics insofar as her conception of the authorial self is one of many in a pseudo-rhizomatic web of communal

²⁰ Peter Quartermain's introduction to *Robert Duncan: The Collected Later Poems and Plays* discusses Duncan's issues with publishers, and the importance of the fifteen-year break from publishing in detail, noting that this interrum period between *Bending the Bow* and *Ground Work* was intentional and disruptive. He writes that Duncan, fed up with publishing errors and inattention to detail during the printing and publication of *Bending the Bow*, "swore to publish no new books for fifteen years, and to take control of publication himself" (xxx).

responsibility, as I will explain in more detail later. It is from this jumping-off-point that a postanarchist reading can look beyond the apparently monadic representation of an authorial point of view in Levertov's work. That communal responsibility, especially through its reliance on attentiveness, breaks down the monadic self even as it relies on it for its politics. Of course, this is a move that runs counter to the minimally egoic poetics of writers like Cage, Mac Low, and Duncan. In addition to this communal responsibility, I argue that Levertov's reliance on the personal is also clearly gendered. It implies that the minimally egoic poetic text is made more easily available in a masculinist framework that already has a strong tradition of poetic voice from which it can depart.

While by no means a radical feminist writer, Levertov nonetheless relies on the personal for her organic, political lyrics in a highly gendered manner, insisting on the presence of a feminine or feminist voice in poetic tradition. Of course, by the 1960s in the US there was already a plethora of contemporaneous and predeceasing feminine literary voices from which even (or perhaps especially) her male peers were working. These feminine voices often provided for these male writers a point of departure for their minimally or anti-egoic poetics, as in Mac Low's use of Stein, which I have already discussed. Duncan's work is also particularly indebted to a series of female literary predecessors including Stein, and more famously H.D. As Dewey notes in her article on the Duncan/Levertov correspondence, Levertov was actually quite drawn to the ways that Duncan appealed to H.D.'s work as part of a literary common in his *The H.D. Book*. Dewey writes:

While not changing her belief that poetry is grounded in the personal, she admits increasingly the influence of forces beyond deliberate craft in poetic composition and praises Duncan's formulation of H.D.'s gift as a transcendence of the

personal, ‘no longer *her* art’ but ‘*The Art.*’ (113)

But, what Levertov envisions in her communal responsibility is not quite an Art from which we all borrow, but rather an identity that we all share. In this manner, her approach to the common is less linguistic than Duncan’s (or Cage’s or Mac Low’s for that matter). Instead, her holistic approach to the self gestures towards an identity which is always already problematized, picking up on a major thread of feminine and feminist poetics before her.

It is this facet of Levertovian identity that Narbeshuber focuses on in her analysis of *Relearning the Alphabet*, one of Levertov’s most famous and most overtly political works. Narbeshuber writes that *Relearning the Alphabet* follows a long tradition of women’s poetry in that she “writes passionately about the problems of identity, placing the self within the public sphere” (132). For Narbeshuber, Levertov’s problematizing of identity or selfhood in her political work comes in the form of embodiment, a term that frequently comes up in recent analyses of Levertov’s work. Levertov’s political and poetic common confronts the disconnect between the linguistic and material realm, and uses the materiality of language (which I have already identified as a point of skepticism in her work) as a means to approach the necessary interconnectedness of human and ecological existence in the real (which is to say, non-poetic) world. In Narbeshuber’s words, Levertov “presents a self very personally considering its relation to the world” (143). While focusing on the material, and particularly on flesh and the physical connection between beings, one might expect that Levertov would privilege separation. But, actually, this stressing of materiality in turn stresses the materiality of connection, making all too real the communal responsibility Levertov advocates throughout.

This move is clearly evident in *The Jacob’s Ladder*, wherein the authorial or writing self is multiple, fragmented, and attempts to see from many viewpoints, many “I”s/eyes. This occurs

most obviously in the second of the “Three Meditations,” when Levertov grammatically dismantles the speaker and, by proxy, the viewpoints expressed by the author. She writes:

I, I, I, I.
 I multitude, I tyrant,
 I angel. I you, you
 world, battlefield. (16-19)

The segmentation of the self occurs as a part of interconnection, where the second-person “you” of the reader is enjambed and enmeshed with the speaking subject. Here the common of the “world” is a clash, a cleaving of subjectivity on a battlefield that provokes the reader to recognize his or her subjectivity alongside his or her place in the “public sphere,” to recall Nabeshuber. Norris gestures toward this interconnection, but fails to note it outright, when he discusses the politics of Levertov’s “shifting, changing nature of the subject/poet/speaker” that attempts to maintain a point of view while necessarily moving with perception (346). Much like the separation of “self” and “Self” in Duncan’s work, Levertov sees the potential for an open “Self” beyond totalizing social structures. It is also interesting to note that the four “I”s back-to-back recall Sylvia Plath’s “Ich ich ich ich” in “Daddy,” reminding us again of the feminine poetic interest in linguistic subjectivity and its complications.

Returning to *The Jacob’s Ladder*, the most striking, and most political, example of this cleaving of the monadic self appears in what is perhaps the collection’s most famous and most frequently anthologized poem, “During the Eichmann Trial,” where Levertov meditates on the war crimes trial of former SS officer Adolf Eichmann. In light of Duncan’s eventual criticisms of Levertov’s overtly political work, one might expect this piece to reek of dogmatism, but it is actually a striking example of the ways that Levertov’s position as gendered Other in a vastly

male-dominated school of poetry afforded her the opportunity to engage the personal politically, and to do so in a manner that brings to light the radical potentials of selfhood and its possible permutations. “During the Eichmann Trial” begins with an epigraph from Duncan which reads “When we look up / each from his being,” and suddenly the masculine pronoun offends. I do not mean to suggest that the poem is purposefully or overtly feminist, but rather that Levertov’s position as one of the few women associated with Black Mountain, or one of the two women brought in to speak at the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference, afforded her a position as outsider, and one for whom the minimally egoic was less available, and even less alluring.²¹ Instead, the poem speaks from an “I” that is forced to confront her inherent connection with Eichmann by virtue of the humanity of both. The first page of the poem contains the strikingly bolded lines:

Here is a mystery,

a person, an

other, an I? (“i When We Looked Up” 16-8, emph. Levertov’s)

Linked by humanity, and by an apparently natural desire to ignore and to obey, Levertov’s speaker faces a connection with Eichmann, a man she finds abhorrent, but with whom her subjectivity eventually becomes enmeshed, first through pronouns (“he, you, I, which shall I

²¹ Though it is a little late in this chapter to make a claim about its approach, it is important to note my choice throughout to read Levertov as a lyric poet with a clear politics whereas I approach the male poets of my first chapter (Cage and Mac Low), and to an extent Duncan in this chapter, as formal poets in whose works I find a latent politics. I do this not to differentiate gendered poetic voices but rather to demonstrate the difference between the highly formalized poetics of these three male poets and the less overt formal innovations of their female colleague. One might argue that Levertov’s form remains less overtly experimental because she, as a marginalized female voice in a male-dominated field, may have felt the need to clearly and explicitly voice her politics in order to be taken seriously. These male poets, without the added burden of needing to assert themselves as voices that needed to be taken seriously, were perhaps afforded greater freedom to experiment formally. There was, of course, a tradition of female poets doing radical and formally innovative work before Levertov, but they also had historic difficulty being considered important and effective political poets in their time, for example Stein. I do not have the time or the space to do justice to such a claim, but it seemed pertinent enough to include.

say?”), then through identification (“we are members // of one another.”) So, when the “windows of history” are smashed near the poem’s end, Levertov smashes subjectivity along with them. “During the Eichmann Trial” still preaches in some form; it teaches its readers the importance of conviction rather than blind obedience and it reminds us all of our communal responsibility to each other. With its reliance on images of “looking up” and watching the trial (watching other humans, looking into their eyes), it also relies quite heavily on a predetermined speaking/writing point-of-view. But, it also works in some small way to dismantle subjectivity, to smash it like a window until it stutters again with its “I, I, I, I.” A self, to be sure, but always in fragments, and thus not minimally egoic, but multiply so; a rhizomatic public sphere in which we as selves collide into responsibility like the molecules we are.²²

Ultimately, the self for Duncan is unknowable, indefinable, and open, and this conception of the self helps to produce the common that is so integral to Duncan’s poetics and to my own postanarchist literary theory. If the socially constructed self is overcoded to the point that it becomes closed off by its identification with social institutions, then the self that Duncan

²² Comment by Andy Weaver (27/1/14): “I wonder if you could clarify where you see Duncan on the ‘minimally egoic / multiply egoic’ continuum? It seems to me that he would fall more into the latter, through his use of allusion/quotation—but quotation also downplays one’s own ego (so would he fall somewhere more in the middle)? I also wonder if, in slightly later poems (like ‘Staying Alive’) where Levertov quotes fellow protesters quite a lot, if her use of quotation also works to multiply and/or minimize her ego? (I suppose these questions are slightly outside the area of your discussion, but maybe you could drop in a few thoughts on these points?)”

Response (27/1/14): “I would say that Duncan’s relationship to this continuum I’ve set up is a bit more complicated. I would suggest, actually that while he’s a little closer to the middle than the other author’s I’ve discussed, I think he leans more towards the minimal. While I take your point that quotation downplays the ego (of course, that’s part of what I argue in the Duncan plateaus), I would also not say that the use of quotation makes Duncan multiply egoic either. That is, unlike Levertov’s attempts to represent the self as multiple, always viewing through various perspectives, Duncan’s collage-like work (just read an article on Jess, been using that term to apply to everything lately...) uses a multitude of voices to dismantle perspective almost entirely. For that reason, while there are quite clearly multiple voices in *Passages* poems, they rarely constitute perspective. For example, the reader is not encouraged to momentarily see the world from the point-of-view of Boehme, or Gascoyne, or Pound, or Olson. To rely on a cheesy metaphor I just made up: in the common, Levertov passes around binoculars, Duncan the microphone. In my head it’s the coolest protest/sit-in ever.”

develops in his poetry helps to create the common by virtue of its fluidity, its lack of parameters, and thus its ability to forge new assemblages and connections with other selves, other texts, and other authorial positions. Levertov's conception of the self is radically different, but no less integral to the common proposed here. Her work suggests a self that is multiple, and in its multiplicity it *includes* not only alternatives but also the very social institutions from which Duncan would distance himself. Levertov's shared multiplicity with the common creates what I've called the multiply egoic, a conception that I believe both contrasts with and complements Duncan's (and in my earlier chapter, Cage's and Mac Low's) minimally egoic work. The result is a conception of the common in which selves do not entirely refuse the coding of social institutions, but rather seek out radical postanarchic alternatives, forging new connections that rely equally on communal responsibility and radical singularity.

The Writing Anarchist

In 2008, when Andy Weaver published the aforementioned article "Promoting 'a community of thoughtful men and women': Anarchism in Robert Duncan's *Ground Work* Volumes" in *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, he noted that "when it comes to Duncan's poetry, [the] underlying political anarchism often goes unnoticed" (75). And yet, a look at this anarchism is crucial. For Weaver, Duncan's formal anarchism is a means through which we can understand his turn from a more didactic political engagement in his Vietnam War-era poems, exemplified by the *Passages* poems included in *Bending the Bow*, to the anarcho-communism implied by the form in the *Ground Work* volumes. "Specifically," he writes, "I would like to suggest that the writing in the *Ground Work* volumes is effective political poetry because it avoids (for the most part) the oppositional, polarizing attacks found in his Vietnam War-era poetry" (71). In this case, the poems collected in the *Ground Work* volumes provide readers with a more effective anarchist

poetics by virtue of their politics of communal engagement; they propose “a textual anarchist-communist community, a community that includes Duncan himself, the diverse writers from whom he quotes, language itself, as well as the reader. The form of Duncan’s later poetry works to tear down the boundaries between individuals” (93). These late *Passages* poems, as I’ve demonstrated, propose an anarchist approach to language that resists notions of intellectual property in favor of interconnection between and within texts and readers/writers.²³ In their serial nature, the *Passages* poems suggest an anarchism predicated on disrupting the traditional closure-based boundaries of the text: “serial poems, by their nature, are anarchistic because they call into question the boundaries between the individual and the surrounding community. ... In other words, serial poems emphasize the openness of the writing and expose the arbitrary nature of textual closure” (82). But, as Weaver is quick to note, this lack of closure or cohesion does not at all imply formal chaos. Rather, it is a refusal to impose order upon the already natural or organic order that Duncan sees as pre-existing (83).²⁴ In this sense, the openness of the serial poem embraces Duncan’s long-held belief that controlling, let alone owning, language is impossible. As Dewey points out, Duncan “came to perceive language as a force beyond the poet’s control” (“Creeley” 91).

As Duncan’s contribution to anarchist publications like *Direct Action*, and his attendance of anarchist-activist group meetings attests, his anarchism was not limited to poetic form. Instead, his anarchic approach to poetry was born out of an anarchist desire for communal

²³ In Weaver’s words: “If, as Duncan believes, all language is owned and created by all individuals, then all utterances are also necessarily the community’s, not the individual’s, and can be used by anyone” (80).

²⁴ Duncan, in his interview for *The Sullen Art*, for example, argues that the world is ordered in natural and organic ways, as in atomic and molecular structures that govern all organic and inorganic life. Nonetheless, Duncan maintains that the imposition of order is unnecessary, and that, even more controversially, this natural order implies that “the disordered is literally impossible” (*A Poet’s Mind* 11).

responsibility in a very real sense. Weaver notes this link when he draws a clear parallel between Duncan's activist anarchism and his poetic one, writing: "if, as anarchists hold, non-hierarchical equality is an organic characteristic that exists in the natural world, then this equality must stretch beyond the human world—all creatures are, if not equal, then equally necessary in anarchistic thought" (90). Similarly, Duncan often spoke candidly about the intersections between his activism and his poetry, noting that while these two concerns are necessarily linked, he actually takes a radically different approach to each; his poetry is clearly responsive, while his political activism is what Duncan calls reactionary (which has for him a very specific meaning). As he explains to Melnick, these two concepts (reaction and response) are quite different from each other: "In reaction, imagination doesn't have to come in. Old habits govern. In politics and many things, I would say I would be 'reactionary,' because I have a blind 'reactionary' fury and a hatred at what goes on in politics, which is hardly known as a response" (*A Poet's Mind* 40). In light of what I (and countless other scholars) have noted about Duncan's pacifism, such an endorsement of "fury and ... hatred" seems quite out of place, and in the interview Melnick, too, is taken aback. But, as Duncan goes on to explain, there is a significant time and place for reaction. Reaction serves, in his politics, as a momentary break from the activity of responsibility, rather than a kind of unthinking knee-jerk reaction. "Responsibility is not a total kind of thing," he argues, "because there is a point at which reaction will set in and we see why reaction exists, because otherwise we'd be exhausted by responsibility" (*A Poet's Mind* 41). So, to temper the potential exhaustion of unrelenting responsibility, the anarcho-pacifist Duncan advocates brief moments of blinding rage. It would be inaccurate to suggest that his politics were wholly reactionary, or worse, that his poetry is indicative of a similar political vein.²⁵

²⁵ Duncan's brand of anarchism began as more openly activist, but eventually moved, as he got older, to a distinctly

What I would like to suggest instead is that *Passages* should serve as an intermediary between the anarchic formalism noted by Weaver, and Duncan's raging endorsement of a reactionary politics. In doing so, I would like to pick up a word Dewey uses to describe Duncan's poetic involvement in issues of social change when she argues that he "renders poetry an *intervention* in culture" ("Creeley" 103, *emph. mine*). Understanding *Passages* as intervention, as a poetic series that intervenes in the lives of its readers, is one that requires that we re-envision Duncan's ethical poetics as one that advocates, as many critics have argued, for an active and responsive readership (that, he hopes, will extend well beyond textual practice), but that also invites its reader to be angry, to resist even as s/he responds. The positioning of *Passages* as intervention is best understood through a close look at how the series makes use of the second-person pronoun, especially in *Bending the Bow*.

The appearance of the second-person pronoun in the *Bending the Bow Passages* poems can be loosely organized into two main groups: the first group emphasizes connection, especially between the reader and the author; the second group comes in the form of questions, especially ones about the reader's knowledge. On the first group, these connections are typically characterized in the form of romantic love, wherein the direct address to the reader comes in the very traditional manner of the poet addressing the beloved. In each case, and in keeping with the politics and poetics of love outlined above, the connection between the speaker and the beloved is prioritized above emotion or desire. In "The Currents (Passages 16)" (*Bending the Bow* 58-9), this connection is linked to language when Duncan writes, "I loved all the early announcements of you, the first falling / in love" (40-1). Here romantic connection is tied to "announcement," to

anti-revolutionary activism, owing both to his realization that the only revolution that could be effective must occur on the singular and psychological level, and to his own aging process. As he was once quoted in saying, "at fifty-seven I don't look forward to participating in some revolution; it wouldn't have even begun by the time I would be kind of getting more tired and crawling into a corner" (*A Poet's Mind* 34).

the process of transcribing the lover in order to make real the connection. This link to language quickly becomes a link to *logos*, when the lovers' connection is related, in "The Torso," to the discourse of knowledge: "I know what you desire / you do not yet know but through me" (44-5). In these cases, a direct relationship is formed between author and reader, where the author speaks to the reader through the traditional address to the beloved, an important generic feature of the lyric love poem. And yet, this is also inherently an anarchist political act, as these direct addresses seek to destabilize epistemology ("you do not yet know") in favor of an affective connection between poet and reader ("but through me").

This first group of pronouns is inherently linked to the second, a series of direct addresses to the reader in the form of questions about his/her knowledge. In "The Fire (Passages 13)" (40), the reader is addressed when Duncan's speaker asks for his/her linguistic familiarity, only to concede his own ignorance: "Do you know the old language? / I do not know the old language. / Do you know the language of the old belief?" (12-4). In this case, the "old language" is not necessarily prior knowledge, and it is certainly not a knowledge that is being tested. Rather, it is a *logos* hedged on "belief," an epistemology that devalues factual or scientific knowledge in favor of an affective knowledge of belief and feeling. These direct addresses work to engage the reader with the text and its methods of "tear[ing] down boundaries between individuals," to return again to Weaver. In this sense, the *Passages* series functions as an intervention into epistemological (and ontological) boundaries that would seek to impose an order on what, for Duncan, would otherwise function just as well. He addresses us as anarchist in these moments, desiring an attentive, responsive reader, a reader ready to resist these boundaries.

In light of Duncan's anarchist address to us as readers, I should at this point address the fact that my very inclusion of Levertov in this project, especially in this section alongside the

self-professed anarchists like Duncan, Cage, and Mac Low, is both contentious and strange, and requires, I should think, some explanation. It is probably inarguable that Levertov was never an anarchist, although she was certainly an ardent pacifist, which is where her politics most obviously overlaps with the three aforementioned poets. And yet, I maintain that she lends herself to a postanarchist reading just as well as the first three poets did. I know that including Levertov in this list aligns her with a radical avant-garde in a way that, historically and critically, is unprecedented. When I first proposed her inclusion to my supervisor, he was appropriately surprised; he eventually conceded, and I continued to work on her, imagining her originally as the straw-man to Duncan. After sufficient time spent reading and writing about Levertov, however, I have come to the conclusion that Levertov's communal approach to identity and poetic voice is an important contribution to my postanarchist project in its own right. I was elated to find, then, as I read more about Levertov as a woman, that she actually has some important anarchist ties. That is, alongside a brief working relationship with George Woodcock (one of the most famous names in contemporary anarchism), Levertov had a rather long and fortuitous friendship with Herbert Read, whom she credits as being a major influence on her early career, both in terms of her poetry (which he graciously read and critiqued) and making useful contacts in the literary and activist fields. Read, whose *Poetry and Anarchism* is a foundational text in anarchist literary theory, wrote extensively about both poetry and anarchism to general acclaim throughout his career.

While Levertov admits that she was very clearly and heavily influenced by Read in her youth and into the early parts of her career, their friendship is rarely discussed in criticism of her poetry. That said, it is clearly present in the biographical work on her, as in Donna Hollenberg's *A Poet's Revolution: The Life of Denise Levertov* or Dana Greene's *Denise Levertov: A Poet's*

Life. Part of the reason behind this critical neglect is that Levertov herself often characterizes her relationship with Read as a deeply personal friendship, and one based on her early reverence for him. Hollenberg, however, suggests that Read's role in Levertov's life (as poet/critic and as anarchist) shapes Levertov's poetics and politics from very early on. In fact, in an article on Levertov, Hollenberg goes as far as to characterize their relationship as a mentoring: "[a]s a novice she was mentored by the art critic and poet Herbert Read, to whom she dedicated her first book, *The Double Image*" in 1946 (519). When Levertov first encounters Read in her young life, his status as an established poet and critic would make him a candidate for a mentor-like role.

In 1939 or 1940, when a sixteen-year-old Levertov worked up the courage to approach Read, he was already one of the biggest names in the convergence of anarchism and poetry in the twentieth century. Like Levertov, however, Read's position in political and activist poetry was (and remains) fraught with contradiction and controversy, culminating most directly in his acceptance of a knighthood in 1953, which effectively alienated him from the vast majority of anarchist political philosophers at the time. In a contemporary framework, Read's views on anarchism and poetry have largely fallen out of favour, and he is typically characterized as archaic and outmoded. It is interesting to note that, as the poetics of Black Mountain gains contemporary critical attention, Levertov's own politics and poetics have not garnered similar critical attention.²⁶ As a testament to this, I recently attended a conference at the University of

²⁶ Comment by Andy Weaver (29/1/14): "I think there's a crucial typo in this sentence: 'It is interesting to note that, as the poetics of the Black Mountain school gains contemporary critical attention, Levertov's own politics and poetics have garnered similar critical attention.' I believe you mean to say 'Levertov's own... have NOT garnered...'"

Response (31/1/14): "Yes, I meant to say that Levertov has not garnered similar attention. In fact, the criticism surrounding Levertov (especially as, like we've discussed, Black Mountain is becoming cool again in scholarship) is pretty disappointing. It pretty much follows Ostriker's line of thought, or puts Levertov in a continuum with Bishop and Plath and Rich and Rukeyser. That's some nice company, I'll admit, but I don't think it does justice to

East Anglia on the poetry and poetics of the Vancouver Poetry Conference in 1963, and wherein (with Michael Palmer as the keynote speaker) the writings of poets such as Duncan, Olson, Robin Blaser, and Jack Spicer were the topic of numerous papers and discussions. My own paper, an analysis of Duncan and Levertov's correspondence, was the only one to deal with Levertov's work at all, and in the discussion period, her side of the debate was almost entirely ignored in favor of Duncan's more radical (and thus apparently more appealing) work. As I supposed she would function in my own work, Levertov's spectral presence at the conference seemed a straw-man, meant to provide the outmoded politics of resistance that would, through opposition, support Duncan's anarchist claims. In this way, Levertov and Read serve as well-suited bedfellows.

Returning to Read, Levertov treated his influence on her life and work as hero worship. She writes about Read's influence most directly in a short essay entitled "Herbert Read Remembered," which is included in the poetics collection *Light Up The Cave*, but was originally published in *Herbert Read: A Memorial Symposium* (which was itself originally a special issue of the Canadian magazine *The Malahat Review*). The essay is largely autobiographical, and is tellingly glowing, beginning from the point of view of a juvenile Levertov (when she first meets Read at sixteen) and referring to him as a kind of celebrity throughout: "I would gaze at him, my hero, so intensely that it must have embarrassed him had he not been too modest to notice it" (233). But, beneath the teenaged Levertov's worship of Read's status, "Herbert Read Remembered" also demonstrates the political and poetic point at which Read's influence can be most clearly noted in Levertov's work. Amongst the autobiography of the essay, she also repeats Read's words that she transcribed into her own journal in 1942. She quotes him saying: "What

Levertov's work (or to the work of any of those poets) to line those ladies up like that. It's an issue I've been actively pursuing in my Mullen research right now."

history demands in its long run, is the object itself—the work of art which is itself a created reality, an addition to the sum of real objects in the world” (237), to which she adds “[t]hat definition ... gave me, at eighteen, floundering in the beginnings of my life as an artist, a ground to stand on, a measure to try and fill” (237). True to Read’s self-professed convictions, this definition of the art piece is supremely anarchist, and, in some sense, truly egalitarian insofar as it demands that the poem become an object in the world rather than a window, a viewpoint, or a mouthpiece, from which the poet expresses his or her point-of-view.²⁷ This runs counter to the critiques of Levertov demonstrated above, especially as articulated by Duncan.

In *The Jacob’s Ladder*, this understanding of the art piece as viewpoint and object is brought to the fore in the poem “The World Outside” (4), in which the speaker is deliberately positioned as a viewpoint, a set of eyes peering out a window and observing the multiple and cacophonous world external to him or her. In the final part of the poem any discussion of the point-of-view or the evaluations and judgments of the viewing individual give way to the multiplicity of voices; here Levertov juxtaposes the “Groans, sighs, in profusion, / with coughing, muttering” (1-2) with the painful silence of “solitary grief” (5). This poem’s final section exalts in the joy and the noise of the common that cannot be reduced, the envy of the solitary speaker looking in on it. The world outside the poem is “a commonplace” (6), a place where the noises are heard

²⁷ Comment by Andy Weaver (29/1/14): “I’m curious about your discussion of Read’s influence and Levertov’s adoption. Specifically, you write ‘this definition of the piece of art is supremely anarchist, and, in some sense, truly egalitarian insofar as it demands that the poem become an object in the world rather than a window, a viewpoint, or a mouthpiece, from which the poet expresses his or her point-of-view.’ My question is, how does this differ from a New Criticism view of the text? There seems to be an uncomfortable overlap here between Read/Levertov’s position and the New Critics. Any thoughts on that? (And, to perhaps partially answer my question, would a turn to Olsonian “Objectism” help to clarify the distinction, or would that just muddy the water?)”

Response (31/1/14): “Am I guilty of New Criticism? I suppose a bit. What a terrible thought. Yes, something like Olsonian ‘Objectism’ or, maybe more anarchically, Object Oriented Ontology a la Graham Harman.”

from other windows,
 the effort to be merry—ay, maracas!
 —sibilant, intricate—the voices wailing pleasure,
 arriving perhaps at joy, late, after sets
 have been switched off, (7-11)

When the passive, silent activity of watching television ends and the individuals become active participants in their world, they can potentially arrive at the joy of the “commonplace.” The speaker in this poem borders on the passivity of watching television, a passivity that is broken only by his or her refusal to remain silent about the multiplicity he or she observes: to remain silent would amount to an inability to see this common at all because perhaps, the poem’s final lines question, “silences / are dark windows?” (11-2). The speaker, and really this poem as a whole, encourages active and *vocal* participation in the common; producing noise is positioned as the only way to actively engage in this world, to collapse the solitary self into the multiplicity of the common. The poem is one viewpoint among many viewpoints, all of which, it argues through its cacophonous representations of “muttering” joy and grief, is and must remain incoherent.

Understanding Levertov’s work in this way, gives us a way around the critiques that I have detailed throughout, and moves us towards a reading of Levertov that redeems her politics as in keeping with the shifting conceptions and modes of operation of postanarchism. The work of art as a self-contained reality that is contributed in *addition* to those other objects of the world refuses a call to truth or to righteousness. While I argued earlier that Levertov’s conception of a “truth / in fractions” runs counter to a traditional postmodern school of literary theory, especially by way of her turn to the divine, we might also read Levertov’s persistent call to witness and

vocalize our always fluxuating viewpoints as a move towards Read's anarchic conception of the work of art as merely another object amongst many, another node in a rhizome of cultural production. The politics of witness is probably one of the most prominent and politically salient features of Levertov's work, and one that has garnered a good deal of critical attention, especially in the last twenty years or so. The process of witnessing, and of understanding ourselves as merely a frame through which we see the world, is a profoundly postanarchist approach to politics. I would even go as far as to say that it runs counter to Levertov's more socialist-leftist approaches to activism (via protest and affiliation with clearly delineated activist groups). As she repositions the role of the subject as one of viewing rather than of being viewed, she actually complicates the role of the poet-as-mouthpiece. Instead of producing a soap box from which to voice her leftist activist concerns, the idea of the subject-as-viewpoint produces instead a speaker that privileges the fluctuating position of the individual in the community, recognizing sameness while acknowledging that even this shared witnessing is temporary.

I do not wish to pass judgment on this apparent contradiction in Levertov's politics, nor do I wish to pass similar judgment on Read (although, an anarchist knight is a particularly bizarre notion, and one that even I have trouble reconciling). Part of a postanarchist reading practice is exercising a kind of negative capability in which we no longer demand cohesion and stability from language, from a poet, or from his or her body of work. In the end, this lack of cohesion in terms of a clearly defined anarchist framework is anarchist in and of itself, and characteristic of all the poets included in my project. As Palmer said during a discussion of the apparent contradictions in Duncan's critiques of Levertov at the aforementioned conference, "[w]hen you examine the poets, it's all a mass of contradiction." He said this, as I repeat it now, without judgment, and instead with a kind of joviality that suggested the contradictions and

controversies actually make this approach to politics more enjoyable and more effective than a sterile and homogenous approach. What he meant was that while Duncan was angry at the self-righteousness of Levertov, he also had moments of what Palmer termed Duncan's "Blakean self-righteousness." In the end, Palmer concluded, like Read the anarchist knight, or the secretly postanarchist Levertov, that in a truly anarchic fashion: "It doesn't cohere."

Reader as Active Witness

I would do a disservice to the work of both poets if I didn't end this chapter by talking more thoroughly about the well-publicized rift that occurred between them. The conflict between these poets, documented most thoroughly in *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov* (2003), has garnered a good deal of critical attention. However, owing to the largely political nature of each poet's respective oeuvres, and the political basis for their critiques of each other, the vast majority of the scholarship surrounding their correspondence has relied on politics—and namely their political and poetic responses to the Vietnam War—to analyze this rift. I am not particularly concerned with the ways that their arguments are based in political disagreement, more with the idea that the core of this disagreement is actually also centrally poetic, owing to the two poets' variant understandings of the relationship between the poet and his or her reader. This is to say, as Robert J. Bertholf notes in "Decision at the Apogee: Robert Duncan's Anarchist Critique of Denise Levertov," "the discussion comes down to the place of *volition*, individual choice" (5, *emph. mine*). The question of volition is largely a question of the role of active readership. In essence, Duncan opposes how Levertov relates to her readers on a poetic level as well as a political one.

While typically understood as a political rift, Albert Gelpi argues that their feud is really about "different sense[s] of language and how we make meaning" (180), noting that both their

politics and their religious affinities influence their variant approaches to language and thus fuel the divide between them. Essentially, for Levertov language is “referential,” whereas for Duncan it is “self-reflexive” (181). Duncan, as a linguistic poet, understands that “language constitutes the experience of the poem” (185), whereas Levertov, as an organic poet, understands “language . . . as the medium of the poem, not its source and end” (187). While political on the surface, the feud between Duncan and Levertov is underscored by variant and mutually contradictory conceptions of the relationship between the authorial presence and the reader of the text. While both invite their respective readers to actively engage with the text and the textual community it incorporates, they approach the issues of reader volition, community, and active engagement in radically different ways. This disagreement provokes Duncan to critique Levertov’s political poetry, ultimately solidifying each poet’s views in an authoritarian manner that contradicts the communal poetics suggested by each.²⁸

Duncan’s critique of language’s representational function leads him to oppose any art that attempts to voice the concerns of the other. As Perloff argues, “the poet, in Duncan’s view, cannot become anyone’s mouthpiece, not even the mouthpiece of a righteous cause.” (“Poetry, Politics” n.p.). In this way, the polyvocality and communality of Duncan’s reading-writing approach to the *Passages* series serves as a refusal to speak in a unified voice, thus nullifying the potentials of his work to speak *for* or *on behalf of* a readership, the trademark of Levertov’s revolutionary politics. In a letter to her dated 8 November 1971, Duncan voices his disagreement, arguing that her viewpoint “belongs to the old Ptolemaic universe picture” (687).

²⁸ This fact is especially interesting once one considers the fact that, as this chapter demonstrates throughout, their respective positions are actually not as different as either poet maintained. As Peter Quartermain points out, “Duncan’s later strictures on Levertov, whom he accused of serving political and not poetic ends in her poems arising from the Vietnam War, are curiously ironic in that he utters them at a time when similar charges were being laid against his own poetry” (xxix).

Understanding that revolution only ever reinscribes the notions of the society it sought to overthrow, Duncan viewed Levertov's politics as siding with a leftism that is doomed to failure.

Duncan is concerned with the potentials for meaning innate in language itself, rather than language gesturing towards a meaning that exists elsewhere. He argues in his lecture, "Crisis of Spirit in the Word," that "no word refers. Every word is the presence of" (65). Thus the examples of singularities that punctuate *Passages* refer, additionally, to an anti-Saussurian semiotics that embraces the potentials of language to signify on its own. That is, he is interested in meaning²⁹ but not in expression; he makes this much clear when he says, "but it's meaning I'm after, not expression. I'm anti-expressionist" (*A Poet's Mind* 13). For Peter Quartermain, in his introduction to the newly published *Robert Duncan: The Collected Later Poems and Plays*, the distinction between expression and meaning in Duncan is indicative of a move beyond the limitations of traditional meaning-making in an expressive, authorially-driven text. Quartermain notes Duncan's desire "to work beyond the boundaries of apparent meaning, [and] into the 'boundless creational field'—what in [his] essay on [French poet Edmond] Jabés he called 'language beyond language' and 'meaning beyond meaning'" (xxxix). To work towards a "meaning beyond meaning" is to understand "writing not as self-expression but as a matter of potential, of possibility, of process" (xxxix). *Passages* is clearly a movement towards such an understanding of the writing process.

Moreover, Duncan admits that he sees a counter-poetics in Levertov. As writes to her on 16 July 1967: "It does seem clear, Denny, that you are more an expressive poet than a formalist:

²⁹ Comment by Andy Weaver (26/1/14): "A few prompts: would Duncan's use/extension of Pound's notion of tone leading of vowels, and Duncan's notion of rime relate to your discussion of his interest in meaning over expression? Might Duncan's well-known dictum (I believe from a letter to Levertov?) that the poet must not oppose evil, but imagine it be relevant to your discussion? The distinction you draw in your entry between expression and meaning is a particularly helpful one, and should set up the transition into Levertov's work really well."

the poem so often bears the burden of conveying the feel of something or the emotion aroused by something or a thought—giving rise to the poem instead of the poem giving rise to its own objects” (582). Ultimately, what he sees as a dichotomy between expression and meaning functions as the operative that invites active, engaged readers to his own work, whereas Levertov’s apparently dogmatic, prescriptive manner of writing political poetry functions as Perloff’s “mouthpiece” would. This division between expression and meaning is clearly evident in Duncan’s invective to Levertov that “the poet’s role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it” (669), perhaps his most quoted line in their whole correspondence. This is all to say that Duncan’s anarchic privileging of the individual freedom of the reader is mimicked in his conception of the relative freedom of language itself. He tries to free language of the burden of conveying the expressions, desires, or ideologies of the poet-figure, who merely assembles the pieces of language. If language is already organized in accordance with a natural or naturalized order, as Duncan argues everything is, then the poet as weaver merely presents these words to the reader, who engages in an affective relationship (or assemblage) with these pieces. Attempting to convey a political message, as Levertov does, runs counter to his desire to engage his readers as such. Thus, it is entirely unsurprising that his ideal reader is one who does not actually know anything of Duncan the poet, the weaver of these word-tapestries. As he summarizes: “My real imaginary reader is someone who knows nothing of all of that ... who picks up the book anonymous in a secondhand shelf and starts reading poetry, poems of whom he knows not” (*A Poet’s Mind* 53). Receiving this poetry in a free community of public trust and individual freedom, Duncan’s ideal reader is one who arrives without preconceptions, who is invited into the text and has no choice but to engage with the language therein; rather than understanding and agreeing with the poem, this reader is affected by it, invited to love it. The

words Duncan weaves together function not as a map, but as the passages themselves that wind and at times even guide, but primarily allow the reader to pass through them at will, freely.

This all leads me to a moment of affirmation, seeking finally to reclaim Levertov's political work as viable and effectual within an alterglobalization movement that has tended to refuse any and all political art that depends on identitarian politics. What I want to argue here is not that Levertov doesn't rely on identity politics for her poetry, but rather that what Levertov does with identity is postanarchist, and that it sets an important precedent for feminist poets like Susan Howe, Erin Mouré, Harryette Mullen, and Juliana Spahr, who would follow historically, and who follow here in my own project. Essentially, what we need Levertov for here (in this project, in a postanarchist literary theory generally) is a politics of witness that is leveling, and that has the potential to remove us from ourselves in order to realize the inherent connections of the common. I argue that her reliance on an identitarian point-of-view is redeemable insofar as it constantly recognizes itself as one node in a rhizome of common, and that her call to political engagement is a call to recognize ourselves in poetic/linguistic and in political common with each other.

Recalling Levertov's own quotation of Herbert Read, that the poem should function as one object in connection with a multitude of objects, we must now understand Levertov's poetry as functioning similarly as singularities, as molecules in a larger structure of poetic common. While he does not employ the same delezoguattarian language that I do, it is precisely this singularity of the poetic object that Paul A. Lacey notes when he writes that in Levertov's work, "[t]he fully realized poem is a world in itself" (153). He goes on then to quote Levertov as saying: "Because it creates autonomous structures ... poetry is, in process and being, intrinsically affirmative" (ibid). I am most interested in this concept of affirmation, of affirming the position

of the self only to destabilize it moments later. If Levertov creates poems that exist as objects in a multitude of objects this implies that the occupation of a particular identitarian viewpoint amounts instead to the placing of the poem and the poet in rhizomatic connection with the rest of the world. This understanding complicates the issues of identity and point-of-view discussed above, and that plague critiques of Levertov's work even still. What a postanarchist reading of Levertov's politics suggests is that all viewing, all witnessing, needs a point from which to begin, but it also has the radical potential to destabilize those points through the very act of viewing.

I believe that this is what Ostriker gestures toward in her theory of "the poetics of postmodern witness" which Hollenberg appropriately aligns with Levertov's work (520), even though the poets Ostriker deals with are feminist in nature, and are working through the book-length long poem as a response to the high-modernist tradition of *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, and *Paterson*. Ostriker focuses on Adrienne Rich's "Atlas of a Difficult World," Carolyn Forché's *Angel of History*, and Sharon Doubiago's *South America mi Hija*, and her critical discussion often reminds her readers that she is making note of a trend in these particular texts. Nonetheless, Hollenberg chooses to apply this concept of the postmodern witness to Levertov, but as a result seems to replay the same tired critiques of Levertov's dogmatism, save for the fact that Hollenberg unreservedly sides with Levertov. I, too, am interested in the ways in which Ostriker's theory of the postmodern witness applies to Levertov's work, but in order to expose how the very premise of the postmodern witness is one of destabilization rather than purely reclamation. Ostriker begins by writing of the Rich, Forché, and Doubiago pieces as "ambitiously long poems or sequences of poems, global in reach, formally experimental, each quite different from the others, but sharing certain common assumptions" (35). Already, appending Levertov's work to this list is tenuous, as she tended to shy away from the grandiose

long poem³⁰ (this was, of course, more the territory of her male peers, namely Charles Olson, but we might also view Duncan's *Passages* in this way). At the same time, Levertov can be said—in her polyvocality, her often unconventional use of punctuation, and her fragmentary lineation—to court the formally experimental, and certainly attempts a global reach. I maintain that Ostriker's concept of postmodern witness is useful in reading Levertov, especially because “[p]ostmodern witness ... is a marriage of opposites. It employs the fragmented structures and polyglot associations originating in ... those epitomes of high modernism” (35).

What is most important about the politics of postmodern witness, especially regarding Levertov, is that Ostriker asserts that “it is crucial that the poet is *present* and *located* in the poem. The poet is not simply a phantom manipulator of words but a confused actual person, caught in a world of catastrophe that the poem must somehow both mirror and transcend” (35, *emph.* Ostriker's). Ostriker's language here is telling: the *presentness* and *locatedness* of the poet-figure in the work is vital, but it is also necessarily complicated by the poem's dual role of mirroring and transcending. Rather than adopting some Platonic understanding of the poem as mimetic mode, Ostriker's postmodern witness makes present and locatable the subject, if only to transcend that location, and to thus destabilize the subject in its movement. In this way, postmodern witness functions something like the *ekstasis* of Longinus that so intrigued Mac Low; it moves you, and in so doing, it *removes* you. In this way, Levertov's call to witness is doubly confrontational: it makes you to look, then it makes you to move from where you were.

It is precisely this confrontational tactic that so many critics find objectionable in Levertov's work. This apparently dogmatic confrontation is perhaps most overtly critiqued in

³⁰ Though many of her poems, for example “Staying Alive,” or the slightly longer “During the Eichmann Trial,” could be considered long poems, none of these approach the grandiosity or all-encompassing nature of the long poems that so defined the modernist movement, or that continue to define the poets influenced by it.

scholarship (which is to say, outside of Duncan's quite overt critiques in his letters to her) in Cary Nelson's "Levertov's Political Poetry," an essay excerpt included in Gelpi's volume *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism* (1993). Nelson describes Levertov's poetry, exemplified for him in the collection *To Stay Alive* (1971), wherein "a perfectly commendable moral commitment to practical action *outside* poetry enters the poetry itself. Moreover, she demands that her visions prove equal to direct confrontation" (162). While I, coming from an anarchist framework, am obviously sympathetic to Levertov's confrontational tactics, Nelson views them as unnecessary for, or worse unwelcome in, poetry. Instead, I propose that Levertov's political confrontation in her work functions as deleuzoguattarian assemblage. That is, "[t]he book as assemblage with the outside, against the book as image of the world. A rhizome-book, not a dichotomous, pivotal, or fascicular book" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 23). So, when Nelson critiques Levertov, arguing that "she would create a world in which love is the greater power, but she cannot" (164), his argument is fundamentally flawed. In Levertov's rhizome-book-world, love is the greater power, insofar as it is a love of flux. We must take what are commonly characterized as her modes of resistance and transform them into reclamation of the modes of production of subjectivities, producing experiment rather than resistance, confronting its readers into a love of common rather than a refusal of commonality.

On this point I am somewhat conflicted and I admit this freely. While I do want to reclaim Levertov's work by way of her confrontation of her readers into an experimental common of flux and love, I often wonder about her means. One perfect example of this is the poem "A Solitude" (*The Jacob's Ladder* 68-70), which ends the collection with a resounding call for communal love and shared responsibility. While I, and the postanarchist literary theory I carry with me, support the poem's end goal, this politics is articulated through a problematic

method. The poem tells a more or less narrative of a blind man character who is “in great solitude” (3) in his inability to view the world around him, but who—in the classic ableist figure of the disabled person—has access to a greater ethics and a greater sense of community by virtue of his not being hindered by the limitations of viewing imposed order. The speaker records his or her “good deed” helping the blind man out of a train station, giving particular attention to the assemblage formed when the two characters hold each other’s hands:

his hand and mine
 know one another,
 it’s as if my hand were gone forth
 on its own journey. (50-3)

The poem culminates in the blind man’s movement beyond the helpful stranger, who then observes that “he says he can find his way” (55). In the final stanza of the poem, Levertov moves beyond this narrative and into the striking observation that in asserting his oscillating dependence and independence from the speaker, the blind man asserts the speaker’s position as both separate from and tied to the outside world. The poem ends: “He says, **I am**” (57, emph. Levertov’s), a confrontational, propagandist ethics to be sure, but one that forces the reader into this assemblage, too. However problematic her methods in this case, *The Jacob’s Ladder* encourages the reader to read it as a rhizome-book without ever denying the authority of the writing-subject.

In fact, I’d argue that one way to access Levertov’s protest as experiment rather than resistance is in her insistence on playing the oppressor rather than the oppressed. Despite the number of feminist poets (eg. Rich, Rukeyser) writing at the same time who were interested in

writing about how the feminine is oppressed within a Western society, Levertov used even gender oppression to show Western violence against the global South. Patricia Hampl writes that “Levertov maintained her identity as an outraged, frustrated voice, but as a citizen of the oppressive nation, rather than as a victim of it” (171). While it is still certainly possible to read these poems as polemical, dogmatic diatribes, Hampl suggests that the way out is through.³¹ We must then read Levertov’s political poetry, starting from *The Jacob’s Ladder* and moving onward into even her most Catholic, divining writing at the end of her career, as “poems without grace, full of confusion and sometimes misplaced anger” (Hampl 167). Even when Levertov gets angry at activists and poets who are apparently political, but refuse to take a side or adopt a clear position in times of crisis, we must read Levertov’s insistence on the political importance of witness as, more legitimately, a call to the common, to the comradeship of political experimentation; we must see Levertov’s voice as “strong, clear, not self-righteous, comradely even” (Hampl 170). Her work, expresses a comradeship, a desire for community, and a frustration when that community fails to manifest in the harsh light of American individualism, which, we can say now, Duncan falls victim to; his free individual is no less Thoreau and Whitman because

³¹ Comment by Andy Weaver (30/1/14): “How do you think Levertov’s more explicitly ‘us vs them’ poems challenge or extend Hampl’s point that ‘Levertov maintained her identity as an outraged, frustrated voice, but as a citizen of the oppressive nation, rather than as a victim of it (171)’? It would seem to me that in poems like ‘Staying Alive’ and ‘Tenebrae’ (both from *To Stay Alive*, admittedly) Levertov carves out a sub-community (a polis?) of ethical people (including herself) within the nation, and so would seem to be both a member of the oppressive nation but also explicitly not really or fully a member of that nation (at such times, Levertov seems to present herself as the wise immigrant rather than a citizen). Thoughts?”

Response (31/1/14): “Your question is a good one, and I think to give it a sufficient response, I need to spend more time with *To Stay Alive* than I have. What I will say is that her envisioning of a community of people who can see, who are paying attention more than everyone else, is troubling. I am often put off by it. It’s an insistence on difference, on separation in some form or another from the nation. And this is an important caveat that should be added to Hampl’s argument. But, the difference is spreading (goodness, all I ever really want to do is write about Stein). And by that I mean that Levertov’s pseudo-polis is also always seeking to grow, to expand and connect. It’s why she’s so frustrated all the time at the fact that hers remains such a strong group. In one sense, it is a pretty clear ‘us vs them’ politic. In another, in ‘Staying Alive’ she writes: ‘No life / other, apart from.’ And then it’s all bodies and bodies and bodies.”

Duncan writes him (and I say “him” clearly) as radical. Perhaps this is what Palmer referred to at the conference at UEA as Duncan’s “Blakean self-righteousness.” If Duncan’s provocations fall short, it is because they rely too much on the importance of the individualized singularities and not enough on the sameness that unites them into the larger Book (a fractured truth, perhaps) that he still sees. If Levertov’s prescriptions fall short, it is because she does the opposite, relying far too much on sameness and failing to acknowledge the inherent disparity of the multiple. This is all to say that Levertov’s use of identity politics provides us with a way out, but only as long as we are willing to use identity, use subjectivity, as Hardt and Negri insist in *Commonwealth*, as “a weapon of the republic of property, but one that can be turned against it” (326). It is precisely this turning against violence (against the State), provoked by Levertov’s confrontational politics, that postanarchism requires to make the reading and writing of even the most overtly political poems an activist practice.

In the end, what a postanarchist literary theory must take from looking at Levertov and Duncan alongside each other is that their respective desires for the location of sameness in each other and forging connections between disparate singularities is important for their own relationship to each other. What I mean to say here is simply this: that while historically treated as incommensurate and incommensurable, the politics and poetics of Levertov and Duncan actually represent two sides of the same coin. Whereas Duncan stresses the singular and the attention to detail (ultimately praising the connections between singularities), Levertov stresses the sameness of existence and the importance of communal responsibility. Although trends in radical poetics and politics may have sided with Duncan in their well-documented debate, a postanarchist literary theory understands that reading these poetics together proves the inextricability of these two concepts; the singular is not a negation of the communal, but rather

an integral facet of it. While radically different in both form and content, *Passages* and *The Jacob's Ladder* demonstrate that it is through this understanding of the singular and its role in the multiple that the authority of the author is destabilized, the authority of the reader is recognized, and the site for (post)anarchist intervention is laid bare.

Chapter Three: [a reader culture prefers both: Juliana Spahr and Harryette Mullen

I begin this chapter on feminist poetics with *Response* (1996), the first collection of poetry by the now central experimental poet, Juliana Spahr. I begin with Spahr because I see in her work a clear intersection with Levertov's: a refusal to entirely deny her subjectivity and a reliance on that subjective point-of-view to witness. These two preoccupations, and their tenuous relationship with how we make meaning using language in poetry, would become the major thematics of Spahr's later work, such as collections like *thisconnectionofeveryonewithlungs* and *Fuck You – Aloha – I Love You* which have become mainstays in contemporary anthologies and course syllabi. In *Response*, these thematics are nascent, tentative. *Response* tests the waters of poetry's potentials for resistance, for experimentation. In the sections that follow, I will look to issues of selfhood and subjectivity, a poetics of witness, and a conception of language as common in order to flesh out the experimental potentials of the collection and to analyze how the text fits in with the poets that make up my earlier chapters. I will also look at Spahr's concern with linguistic expression and linguistic violence in order to expose the ways her work departs from these literary predecessors, and opens up a feminist poetics that, in true postanarchist fashion, envisions poetry as a space for activism and alternative voices. After all, as Katy Lederer's review of *Response* exclaims: "If any act of poetic writing can be thought of as action, this is it" (140).

In sum, my work on *Response* strives to read *against*¹ Spahr, which is her own term for a reader-centric reading strategy outlined in "A, B, C: Reading Against Emily Dickinson and

¹ Comment by Andy Weaver (1/1/2014): "As for Spahr's notion of reading against, maybe you could clarify (in a footnote?) how/to what extent that differs from Barthes's concept of the writerly? Is it that Spahr demands more agency for the reader (perhaps suggesting that Barthes's notion, because it is implicitly a granting of power from the author to the reader, is still unintentionally author-centred)?"

Gertrude Stein.” In this essay, Spahr considers the connections between Stein and Dickinson, asserting that “[b]oth writers create a reader-centered poetics. One which, without denying that the author is an authority, denies that the author is *the* authority and establishes a similar authority for the reader”² (281). Spahr uses this disruption of the authority of the writing subject to envision a new way of approaching literary texts; the strategy of reading against is decidedly insurgent. It takes as a starting point Mac Low’s eventual concession that all writing is egoic, but it also refuses *the* authority of a controlling writing subject. Reading against explicitly opposes the modes of traditional criticism. As Spahr contends, “[a]gainst is the bastard cousin of Bloomian ‘influence’ in that it denies or skews issues of originality and pursues misreading” (281). While this summary of reading against may, at first, sound reactionary or revolutionary, and thus in opposition to postanarchism generally, its conceptions of the multiple and its privileging of rhizomatic connection actually make it a mode of alternative and experimentation *par excellence*. As reading against forges and legitimizes anachronistic or improper connections, as it develops rampant and wonderful misreadings, it rewrites literary history. Reading against “is not a genealogy, but a rethinking of reading and the connection between texts” (283), and one that understands, in what I have established as a hallmark of postanarchist literary theory, that poetry—that all literature—is common.

While rarely explicitly anarchist, Spahr’s work in *Response* can be characterized by the same insurgent attitude that her concept of reading against suggests. In her article, “The 90’s,” a survey of experimental poetry from the nineties published in *boundary 2* in the fall of 2009, she outlines a poetic climate fraught with debate between “writing that turns from standard English

² Spahr’s concept of reading against differs from Roland Barthes’s concept of the writerly insofar as it repositions the reader not as a substitute or additional author (as we might understand Barthes’s death of the Author-God to do), but rather to place particular emphasis on the radical potentials of a more free reader to engage with a text in controversial or counter-traditional ways.

and one that upholds standard English” (173). Spahr sees this turning from standard English as necessarily anti-imperialist and, in some ways, anti-capitalist, and argues that this vein of poetry was fuelled by the nineties’ “perfect storm” of political resistance and experimentation. That is, moments of collective resistance in the nineties, as in the Zapatista revolution and the WTO mobilization, sought large and overarching goals through multiple voices concerned with multiple projects and employing multiple tactics. They were, as she describes them, “successful thought experiments in what a universalism with room for particularity might look like on a very practical level” (173-4). For Spahr, the nineties in poetry saw these practical experimentations as intrinsically tied to the potentials of poetry for similar experimentation in language, generalized under Spahr’s wide-reaching notion of turning from standard English.

Response is littered with examples of a grappling with the radical experimental potentials of language and their correlative, the radical potentials of activism. The collection implies, at first, that the starting point of a politics of experimentation is a resistance that stems from anger not unlike Levertov’s. Spahr writes: “the anger is to draw attention to the way anger is a just response / to how they will be angry until just witness is begun” (“witness: VI” 40-41). Where Spahr departs from Levertov’s call to political action and engagement is that *Response* suggests that the most effective political content is marked by its enactment rather than its dogmatism.³ In the first section of “responding,” the speaker remarks on the reading of “a book that is so subtle” that “[its political content goes unnoticed” (“responding: I” 6-7, no close to square bracket), a book that eventually provokes the speaker to ask: “what is political content?” (8). As the boundaries of what dictates political content are blurred by what Spahr terms a subtlety, she

³ In this way, Spahr’s suggestions in *Response* recall those of Andy Weaver in “Promoting ‘a community of thoughtful men and women’: Anarchism in Robert Duncan’s *Ground Work* Volumes,” where he argues that when Duncan’s politics move from prescriptive in *Bending the Bow* to enactive in *Ground Work*, the result is a more effective and useful anarchist politic.

advocates a poetic language that, in working against standard English, promotes an anarchic moment of insurgency, a Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) where the inherent instability of language is allowed to flourish. In this vein, “responding” begins with the line, “This is a place without a terrain a government that always changes an unstable language” (“responding: I” 1). The ambiguity of Spahr’s syntax here is telling; the grammar of the line makes it unclear if the place is without both terrain and government, or whether the terrain-less place is also a government in flux. Moreover, the line might suggest that this “place,” both without physical boundary (terrain) and authority (government) changes an already unstable language, or else this “place” that is always in flux *is* an unstable language itself. This ambiguous syntax enacts the politics of the “place,” the primary situation of *Response*, embodying (which is to say, locating in the physical) while at the same time destabilizing activist movement.⁴ Additionally, the “This” that starts this line is a use of deixis with no contextualizing information, no object external to it to which it refers. “This ... place” is intentionally ambiguous, a nonplace whose location in the physical realm is thus tenuous at best.

Lederer sees these dual goals of destabilizing and materializing as the most effective antitraditional tactics of *Response*. She sees these goals most clearly enacted in Spahr’s insertion of the generic, especially by way of her intrusive use of the bracket, into an otherwise particular work. Lederer writes, in the same review quoted above, that “[b]y inserting ‘the generic’ within [her margins], Spahr transmutes the ghostly—thus invisible—margins of the traditional book into the space of the ‘embodied’—thus vulnerable—textual center” (142). What Lederer points to in Spahr’s transmutation of the traditional book’s margins is that the bracketed generic

⁴ Comment by Andy Weaver (1/1/2014): “Is it also possible to read that line as suggesting something less positive, that is, that it’s a place where a government always changes/manipulates to its benefit an unstable language? Is that another possible caveat against what you call, at the end of the plateau, the ‘potentially damaging role’ of ‘art in politics’? Or is my reading too extreme?”

insertions function as TAZs, moments of insurgency and displacement that are still necessarily encased within more traditional confines. In “responding,” these TAZs get characterized as Spahr’s “[New State],” in which poetry and art in general serve a crucial purpose. She writes, “we know art is fundamental to the [New State]” (“responding: II” 3). In this conception, “[New State]” is a TAZ, a future anarchy that is as unstable and undefinable as Spahr’s conception of the self. At times, these bracketed insertions even directly contest issues of nation as a means of definition, as in “documentary” when Spahr uses brackets to redact these terms: “[name of nation used as an adjective deleted]” (1).

Spahr is careful not to overstate the political potentials of poetry, and in this sense surpasses Levertov’s naïve view of political affect. In a few examples in “responding,” she writes of occasions when the political import of art fails against the physicality of real violence. This can be seen when “[name of major historical figure],” a still generic figure that speaks to the pervasiveness of this violence, “calls, authentically, for a more total, more radical war than we can even dream in the language of the avant-garde” (“responding: II” 5). Later, art proves not only ineffectual, but also potentially damaging in this material realm when “while overwhelmed by an opera [name of major historical figure] plans genocide” (“responding: II” 27). While these examples speak to the potentially ineffectual or damaging role of art in politics, the bracketing of the “major historical figure” sets him/her in flux, blurring the lines of history, politics, and even artistic tradition. As Spahr’s readers, we take on the burden not only of envisioning these violences on a very real level, but also of occupying the bracketed spaces ourselves. That is, because of the generic wording and the general vague, open, or bracketed way that Spahr presents the violences of the text, it is up to the reader to envision how and when these violences occur in the real, lived experiences of ourselves as subjects, and of subjectivities other than

ourselves. In this way, the reader occupies these bracketed spaces, becoming the various [generic pronouns] included therein, but also momentarily occupying the positions of “major historical figure” and the other slightly more specific subjectivities. This reader-envisioned violence and the incorporation of the reader in the process of meaning-making pervade *Response*, making it an ideal candidate for exposing the radical potentials of a postanarchist reading practice to allow for reading as activism.

Recycled Aphasia: Non-exhaustive Readings of Harryette Mullen

I move from Spahr’s clear anarchist sympathies to the work of Harryette Mullen who, while in no way anarchist herself, instead offers postanarchism a method of resistance that is highly experimental and interested in the radical alternatives offered to readers and writers in, and through, language. The connection between these two poets is clear; not only do the two read together frequently, moving in similar experimental circles, but also because Spahr has devoted much of her own critical scholarship to discussing Mullen’s work. For example, a chapter of *Everybody’s Autonomy* (2001), an adaptation of Spahr’s doctoral thesis, discusses Mullen’s *Trimnings* and *S*PeRM**K*T*. Spahr also provides the introduction for Barbara Henning’s experimental and hugely informative book of postcards and interviews, *Looking Up Harryette Mullen* (2011). In *Everybody’s Autonomy*, Spahr focuses on the connective reading practices and collective approaches to identity that she sees as encouraged by Mullen’s work. She begins these discussions by noting the clearly defined subjectivity of Mullen’s earliest work, *Tree Tall Woman* (1981), but by also asserting that Mullen’s later work moves away from this identifiable authorial subject-position. Ultimately, she argues that “[t]here is no clear ‘I’ in Mullen’s later books” (108). For Spahr, this disruption of authorial subjectivity shifts the focus onto the reader rather than the clearly delineated author, partially through complicating potential exegetical

readings. In more concrete terms, Spahr's theory of connective reading argues that the disruption of the lyrical "I" in Mullen's work is part and parcel with the loading of the poem with multiple and multifarious cultural information. "While this work allows readers to do the unpacking," she writes, "it is always a provisional unpacking because the markers are so loaded with culture that one cannot come up with an easily exhaustive answer" (113). Essentially, Mullen's work complicates exegesis by overwhelming or overloading the text—and thus the reader—with too many possible meanings. In this way, Mullen's work is similar to that of Cage and Duncan, though admittedly these texts are all created in different fashions. An interest in radical connections within and outside of the text unites all three of these authors. But, unlike Cage's nonsemantic meaning, we may say that Mullen's work is supersemantic, overloaded—and thus not overcoded—with semantic possibility. And, unlike Duncan's interest in linking his work to other texts through radical intertext and allusion, we may say instead that Mullen looks to inscribe her multiplied self onto existing texts. Or, to put this another way, where Duncan sought to position *Passages* as a series of rhizomatic nodes, Mullen instead works to create a multiplicitous authorial voice that produces texts that are deceptively rhizomatic. If *Passages* openly displays its multiplicity and complexity, the seeming simplicity of Mullen's work in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002) and elsewhere demonstrate the necessarily rhizomatic nature of all things we might otherwise consider singular, especially identity. In this way, the difference between Mullen and these two earlier poets is of degree rather than kind.

What makes this turn away from one clearly defined authorial position to the multiple in Mullen's later works so fascinating is that, as Spahr indicates, the shift is political insofar as it critiques the very system of binarism that my project opposes, the binarism that Spahr and Mullen both assert makes oppression and domination possible. Approaching Mullen's poetry as

a manifestation of the multiple or the common dismantles the structures of reading and writing that promote binary thinking. As Spahr writes, “[v]iewing works as sites of complication rather than exclusion avoids the either/or of thought that so pervades systems of domination” (118). Despite a lack of a unified authorial subjectivity, Mullen’s work articulates certain perspectives (however multiplied) that function simultaneously as inclusive and exclusive. This is a major feature of the discussions between Mullen and Henning, who frequently point out where the erasure of subjectivity succeeds in textual production, and where it fails. For Henning, Mullen’s work may function inclusively insofar as the lyrical “I” is complicated, but, especially in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, the reader is also often made to confront his or her exclusion from the text and the various cultural experiences it seeks to represent. Henning tells Mullen, “[w]hen I was reading your poems, I always knew when I was an outsider, looking in from another cultural experience or even from my own purposeful alienation from everyday television & advertising” (16). My project interrogates this apparent borderland between inclusion and exclusion, between the identifiable authorial subject and the commonality of connective reading and writing put forth by Spahr and tacitly endorsed by Mullen.

To do this, I would like to begin with a discussion of “All She Wrote,” the first poem of *Sleeping with the Dictionary*. The poem provides a good introduction to the major issues in Mullen’s poetics more generally, and to my own observations on how her work illuminates a postanarchist reading process. As a prose poem, like each of the poems in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, “All She Wrote” already exclaims the multiple and its interrogation of traditional poetics. In its conversational tone, it signals to its reader that it looks to engage with him or her on a personal and potentially affective level. And yet, throughout the page, “All She Wrote” sees the speaker apologizing to his/her reader for, absurdly, not writing. S/he pleads with the reader

for forgiveness, complaining: “You know how scarce paper is these days. I admit I haven’t been recycling.” While this is, on the surface, an excuse for not writing, it is also a tongue-in-cheek way of demonstrating the line Mullen walks between borrowing/allusion and innovation, which I will discuss later. Additionally humorous and ecological, these sentences inaugurate the reader into the explosion of cultural markers that, for Spahr at least, prevent exhaustive reading. The poem sets the tone for the collection’s tenuous relationship with the authorial subject.⁵

When Henning asks Mullen directly about this particular poem in the second part of *Looking Up Harryette Mullen*, Henning primarily questions the surface aspect of the poem, prodding at the inspirations for, and the material conditions of, the poem’s production. Mullen responds: “It is a litany of excuses for not writing. Not writing letters to friends and just not writing poetry, stories, or essays, or whatever I was intending to write. I also hear lots of excuses from my students and my writer friends” (43). I am interested in the extent to which Mullen’s seemingly impersonal and anti-subjective poetics—born out of the LANGUAGE tradition—also has clear grounds in the autobiographical, recalling Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* in its simultaneous adoption and disruption of the lyrical “I.” I am also interested in Mullen’s description of the production of “All She Wrote” as pragmatic and practical, completely without the ephemerality of inspiration and musing. For Mullen, the poem is also about writer’s block, and about using experimentation, innovation, and constraint-based writing processes as a practical way out of the often debilitating issue of inspiration. Thus, Mullen’s frequent use of constraint in her work, in particular her adoption of the Oulipian $n + 7$ method in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, functions

⁵ Amy Moorman Robbins notes that, in contrast to the vast majority of *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, “All She Wrote” dwells suspiciously on the authorial subject and the lyric “I.” She writes: “The excessive presence of the ‘I’ in ‘All She Wrote,’ coupled with relentless references to the speaker’s inability, incompetence, unavailability, and state of general illness, work at one level to advance an idea of Mullen’s speaking subject as hyper-present in damaged form; indeed, up until the final turn, ‘I,’ ‘me,’ or ‘my’ saturates nearly every sentence” (358).

as a way to start writing when a “writer’s block” might have stopped you. She tells Henning, “[i]n a way, the Oulipians have a solution for the writer’s block problem.⁶ As they say—you never really have a reason for not writing. There’s always a constraint, always another possible project” (43). This is part of what Mullen suggests when she writes, “I suffer from aphasia.”

And yet, true to Spahr’s observations, Mullen’s contradictory aphasia also functions on multiple levels that severely complicate exhaustive exegesis. One element of this is that silence is a major feature of her work. *Sleeping with the Dictionary* frequently interrogates who is given voice and who is silenced, and she reconfigures an inability to speak or a lack of access to speech as oppression and liberation, simultaneously recalling the stuttering of Spahr’s work and the silence of Cage’s. It is the beginning of a book-length interrogation of these issues, as Mullen herself notes to Henning. “It sets the tone,” she says, “announcing that writing itself is a subject” (44). “All She Wrote” positions “writing” as a subject alongside reader and writer; suddenly, the text itself occupies a fraught subject position, and the writer is only one part of the assemblage it forms with literary tradition, with cultural experience, and with the radical multiplicity of its

⁶ Comment by Andy Weaver (5/2/2014): “I think this is an obvious question, but is there something about a writer’s block that is helpful in relation to Mullen’s work (and perhaps also the other writers and/or ideas you’ve been working through)? Is that blockage, so disparaged by most authors, something that can help bring about the postanarchist distrust of authorial subjectivity you’ve been discussing?”

Response (13/2/2014): “I hadn’t thought about using writer’s block more, but I definitely agree with your suggestion here. I think that what we call ‘writer’s block’ is often the point when you realize, consciously or subconsciously, that your form (whatever it is) has limits, and that part of what you are trying to write (to offer your reader) is somewhere beyond those limits. I also think that the idea behind ‘writer’s block’ tends to reinforce the understanding of an Author as a medium, as if there is usually a path through which inspiration and artistic creation flow, and now something is blocking its way. The more I think about it, the more I realize there’s something really interesting going on there.”

Response by Andy Weaver (14/2/2014): “This is really intriguing. Just don’t ignore all of those standard conceptions of writer’s block as something extremely tied to personal agency (that is, those clichés of the individual unable to connect with his or her—really, almost always his—own genius). This idea of writer as conduit is an interesting adaptation (and, really, return to the original meaning of the term). And thinking about it in relation to formal limits seems really fruitful, too.”

readership. This unique approach to authorship allows Mullen to interrogate these moments of recycling and aphasia, dual terms that will repeatedly surface throughout this chapter. After this interrogation of authorship and communication, I will take up these issues of recycling and aphasia—or, less metaphorically, tradition and silence—through the clear politicization of a LANGUAGE poetics, and an insistence on the infusion of identity politics into the writerly texts of the literary avant-garde.

My work on Mullen will also navigate those spaces where one cannot speak, and what voices get silenced, refusing to, as Wittgenstein wrote, pass over them. Following Mullen’s lead, I look at the inherent linguistic, social, and material relationship between silence and *violence*, and how these two terms are intertwined and complicated in an experimental poetics.

Additionally, my work here is interested in the ephemeral alongside the preserved, and looks to develop a Black experimental tradition out of Mullen’s work that moves adeptly between the speakerly texts of the Black Arts Movement and the writerly texts of LANGUAGE poetry and the avant-garde. As such, my discussions of Mullen are particularly concerned with the deleuzoguattarian concept of minor languages and minoritarian politic. I also pay particularly close attention to the race and gender issues innate in tradition, influence, and canon formation, all of which feature prominently in Mullen’s work and in the criticism surrounding it. Ultimately, my work positions *Sleeping with the Dictionary* as the recycling of aphasia, and the embracing of the impossible multiple inherent in that metaphor.

“Now you sound more like yourself”: Collapsing the LANGUAGE/BAM Dualism

The description of Mullen’s work as avant-garde or experimental, or even as a part of the LANGUAGE tradition, is necessarily fraught with complications. To begin, the avant-garde designation tends to be treated as an exclusive club; at times, this “club” metaphor becomes

literal, as in the example of the Oulipo, which, as Spahr notes in her introduction to *Looking Up Harryette Mullen*, is a literally exclusive club that rarely admits women or people of colour.⁷

Spahr is quick to note that one does not need to be a card-carrying member of the Oulipo to carry out their language games. As she writes, “Oulipo techniques are, obviously, frequently used by those who are not in Oulipo. But it is still hard not to read Mullen’s insistence on the Oulipian nature of this book as a polite claiming and insistence on an inclusive tradition” (iv). Mullen’s use of Oulipo explores the relationship between the individual and the communal in a number of complicated ways. To begin, Spahr observes that “*Sleeping with the Dictionary* has Mullen again exploring communiolects, community, and her own subjectivity using what are sometimes called poetic ‘procedures,’ or various composition techniques” (iii). So, for example, Mullen’s use of the $n + 7$ technique is a gesture towards the communal, and away from an individualized subjectivity and a conception of authorial genius. Mullen herself, in the same book, admits that she finds the Oulipian constraints liberating: “I have found that using constraints in this way expands the possibilities for improvisation, as various textual operations may be tried at different points in the writing process” (27). Alongside a freed ability to improvise, Mullen also admires the way Oulipo allows her to place less emphasis on the poem as end-product, arguing that the “idea of ‘potential literature’ liberates the writer to concentrate on the process, rather than the product, of writing” (26), drawing an obvious parallel not only to Oulipo but also to Cage and Mac Low and their concepts of indeterminacy, and to the necessarily provisional nature of the serial poem demonstrated in Duncan’s *Passages*. I would like to move beyond the role of Oulipo

⁷ While I cannot, in the space provided, discuss the gender and race exclusivity of Oulipo in sufficient depth, I would like to point out the publication *The End of Oulipo? An Attempt to Exhaust a Movement* (2013) by Lauren Elkin and Scott Esposito. Its is informative and thoughtful, particularly on the issue of the sexism of, and feminist responses to, Oulipo. It also provides some important discussions of the women writers of Oulipo that are rarely discussed in English criticism because they are rarely translated into English from the French.

in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* and look instead at how the liberation Mullen identifies in the “writerly” avant-garde is one important avenue into understanding her work as collapsing a division between the lyrical work associated with the Black Arts Movement and the avant-garde refusal of subjectivity,⁸ ultimately proving that these schools need not be so separate, let alone antagonistic.⁹

To begin discussing this issue I would like to look first at the poem “Coals to Newcastle, Panama Hats from Ecuador” (16), a poem that is acutely aware of what exists in these two literary traditions with which Mullen has been associated. Of this poem, Mullen tells Henning, “I had the title before the poem, starting with the expression, ‘Coals to Newcastle.’ That’s a city in England that was known for coal mining, so this saying is about getting more of what you’ve already got” (58). While the poem need not necessarily be read in a metapoetic fashion, I cannot help but see it as a desire not to fit in with, or subscribe to, any one particular school of poetry, thus essentially providing readers with “more of what you’ve already got.” Though this metapoetic theme is never explicitly stated, it is suggested by the image of coal, a symbol that

⁸ I should add here that any discussion of the influence of the writerly avant-garde on Mullen would be incomplete without mention of Gertrude Stein. The influence of Stein on Mullen, and Mullen’s frequent direct engagement with Stein’s work, has been well documented critically, and features most prominently in the three collections included in her *Recyclopedia: Trimmings, S*PeRM**K*T*, and *Muse & Drudge*. I will not attempt to do justice to the literature on this issue, but I would like to make note of the fact that Stein provided for Mullen, in both positive and negative ways, one example of the issue of language in race and gender politics from the point of view of privilege and oppression. Indeed, it was Stein’s “privileges that allowed her to romanticize and even ignore the implications of her depictions of characters like Melanctha,” and as such “Mullen seeks to reckon with, rather than dismiss, the power of language and ideology that enabled Stein’s experimentalism” (Mix 43). Accordingly, Mullen’s work is a process of “reckoning with” throughout, refusing to dismiss or ignore the problematics of the avant-garde that troubled her. For more on Mullen’s use of Stein, see Elisabeth Frost’s seminal article, “Signifyin(g) on Stein: The Revisionist Poetics of Harryette Mullen and Leslie Scalapino.” *Postmodern Culture* 5.3 (May 1995).

⁹ Benjamin R. Lempert, in his article “Harryette Mullen and the Contemporary Jazz Voice,” bypasses the issue of the white avant-garde as separate from contemporary black poetry by arguing that in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, Mullen’s collapse of the written/oral division demonstrates that this collapse occurs already in the form of jazz music. That is, she “achieves this figuration by setting its version of corporeality within a space and time saturated with the indeterminate temporality of jazz improvisation,” and this allows her to “refus[e] either the ossification of sound into text or the reduction of text to sound, ... thereby offer[ing] a provocative reading of blackness as experienced in the multiple guises: sonic, temporal, visual” (1060). While this reading differs from mine, I do not find the two incommensurate.

contains within it this same duality that is persistently discussed in regard to Mullen's work: coal as blackness, coal as progress. The coal, of which Newcastle already has too much, represents on the one hand industrial progress, city, machine, and innovation; it prioritizes the material and the successful. On the other hand, coal becomes a symbol of blackness, insofar as it is not only black in colour but that it also colours the skin of those mining it; additionally, coal mining has literary precedent as a symbol of poverty and of labour issues.

The metapoetic elements of this poem are brought to the fore through Mullen's emotional approach to authorship. The speaker insists on the belligerence of emotion, as when he or she states, "I'll be emotionally disturbed for as long as it takes" (16). This interest in emotion takes an important political and metapoetic turn when it attacks the difficult, emotionless, and bourgeois side of avant-garde poetry, as when Mullen writes, "You're too simple to be so difficult. Malicious postmodernism" (ibid). This opposition leads the speaker to turn in on his or herself, ultimately questioning the validity of the reliance on subjectivity and authorial presence representative of the Black Arts Movement and the erasure of subjectivity praised by the avant-garde. The poem ends, "Now that I live alone, I'm much less introspective. Now you sound more like yourself" (ibid). The speaker, who "lives alone" and is thus separated from the social, argues that this separation allows him/her to be free of self-contemplation, to avoid constantly reviewing oneself and one's subjectivity. The paratactic addition of "Now you sound more like yourself" and the sudden shift in pronoun from the first to the second undermine the first sentence. Who sounds like his/her self? The reader? Or is this an external voice directed at the speaker? This final parataxis brings into question one's ability to sound like oneself at all. The suggestion of causality in these final two sentences implies contradiction; in supposing that we ever "live alone," that we can ever become "less introspective," we sound most like ourselves. We cannot

escape subjectivity;¹⁰ in discussing its potential erasure *ad infinitum*, as the avant-garde has tended to do, one simply increases the terms of one's subjectivity.

This dual interest in being less introspective and sounding more like ourselves is primarily what has been used, in criticism, to label Mullen as a “crossover” from a racialized poet of identity towards identity's erasure in LANGUAGE poetry and the avant-garde. And for many, “Mullen's crossover appeal is the prime reason for her popularity” (Hart 143). But her work never treats these two approaches to poetry as separate entities, and therefore the designation of “crossover” is inaccurate. More appropriately, Elisabeth Frost in an interview with Mullen tells her: “It's as though your work is informed by poststructuralist ideas about language, but those ideas are not directly cited. Somehow, the theory is underneath or inside” (405). Mullen addresses the issue in “Poetry and Identity,” which Deborah Mix describes as her self-identifying as “doubly marginalized” and “a member of two groups that have somehow been situated as mutually exclusive” (61). In this essay, Mullen warns against the idea of the crossover. She writes:

¹⁰ Comment by Andy Weaver (13/2/2014): “‘We cannot escape subjectivity’; sure, I guess I'd agree with that. But does that mean that we are necessarily trapped within our subjectivity? To what extent does n + 7 (or Cage's/Mac Low's tactics) lessen or alter that subjectivity?”

Response (13/2/2014): “I think I want to frame these texts as a momentary slippages of the ‘trap’ of subjectivity. As a good critical theorist, I have a lot of trouble conceiving of an outside of subjectivity (we're always already interpollated and blahblahblah). But I also think that the subject in the common is something quite different; it is much more prone to slippages, and it's always in flux. These ways of writing and engaging with readers are ways of lessening the terms of our subjectivity, lessening their rigidity, though. That's for sure.”

Response by Andy Weaver (14/2/2014): “Yep, I would agree completely. I also think that aspiration, which is often thought of as unproductive, might be useful here—I mean, if we don't aspire to a different subjectivity, how can we possibly achieve a new subjectivity? Perhaps planting that seed is the greatest achievement any writer can claim? (I vaguely recall reading or discussing something years and years ago that suggested there was this type of value in ‘strategic idealism’—that is, an aspirational idealism that you know is not feasible at the moment [and perhaps it never will be], but you argue for the idea regardless, in the hopes that it will move the discussion closer to that ideal. I've often thought of Cage in those terms.)”

the erasure of the anomalous black writer abets the construction of a continuous, internally consistent tradition, while at the same time it deprives the idiosyncratic minority artist a history, compelling her to struggle even harder to construct a cultural context out of her own racial individuality. (86)

Mullen as the anomalous black writer resists erasure by, for example, writing as Oulipo without a sense of belonging to the literal Oulipo. While she acknowledges where she's giving you more of what you already have, she also forces you to think about why you have so much of it.

This issue comes up again in the Frost interview, when Mullen laments the fact that “[w]hat people think of as ‘black poetry’ is set aside from what people think of as ‘poetry,’ in terms of tradition, history, how language is used. People have a very specific notion of what black poetry is” (417). To this, Frost responds by arguing, “there is a balance between two different forces. One is an assertion of identity. The other is what I think of as hybridity—the mixture, the different influences all occurring at once. There is sometimes tension, but there doesn’t have to be” (418). Despite Frost’s insistence on the rhetoric of balance and hybridity, what she actually proposes here is a way of approaching Mullen’s writing that sees her as not bridging two schools, but rather embracing the multiple. This is much more productive than the dualism of terms like “balance” and “hybrid,” which tacitly support the understanding that racial identity and experimenting with subjectivity are in opposition, or are at the very least separate.¹¹

And yet, despite the insistence in these terms and in much of the criticism surrounding Mullen

¹¹ The concept of the hybrid is theorized extensively in recent scholarship, and I cannot summarize it here. I would, however, like to make a point about its use in Mullen scholarship. The term is often applied to her work, as in Elisabeth Frost’s “Ruses of the Lunatic Muse,” where she argues that “like the poets of the Black Arts Movement, Mullen experiments with a speech-based idiom, but, like Language-influenced writers, she launches her cultural critique by rejecting the rules of syntax and fashioning a distinctively visual, punning, and allusive play with language” (465). While Frost does argue that this “hybrid” is “shot through with ambivalence” (469), or that it exists “in a realm not of fixed identity, ... but of language in flux” (471), I still worry about what the term hybrid connotes: that these two perspectives were necessarily separate before, and that Mullen has merely brought them together.

that she bridges these two disparate poetic worlds, or that she merges two seemingly contradictory poetic forms, there is some precedent in the most recent scholarship that takes up the arguments Mullen herself has been making for two decades.¹²

Mullen's concept of the "anomalous black writer" foregrounds the assumption that the process of writing from the lyric "I," a less experimental mode, is typically reserved for women, people-of-color, or queer subjects. This is a kind of marginalization that assumes that the white, male, heterosexual poet necessarily occupies a better position from which to critique identity.¹³ Amy Moorman Robbins addresses this issue directly in "Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary* and Race in Language/Writing," wherein she argues that this assumption

draw[s] on a significant and still-operative contrast: that between experimental writing/poetry that is assumed to explicitly or implicitly contest the viability of any given lyric subject ... and writing that foregrounds questions and problems of discrete, often racialized selfhood in specific cultural contexts. (341-2)

For example, Robbins addresses LANGUAGE poet Ron Silliman's assertions¹⁴ that LangPo, and its critiques of identity, has "origins within and for a particular group" and that understanding

¹² "Poetry and Identity" was published in the journal *West Coast Line* in 1996.

¹³ Comment by Andy Weaver (13/2/2014): "I think you can push this point even further. Rather than "occupies a better position from which to critique identity," is it possible that this split also implies that white/male/heterosexual people exist outside of those labels, outside of their physical bodies, while people of colour/women/LGBT people are necessarily trapped within/subject to their physical bodies? In other words, doesn't this split continue on the idea that white/male/heterosexual writers are writing about 'humanity' rather than about white/male/heterosexual people?"

Response (13/2/2014): "I love your point re: bodies. I will definitely incorporate it. Also reminds me of an interview ... where Mullen is talking about Alice Walker and *The Color Purple* and how one reviewer said that it wasn't just a story about the black experience, but the human experience, as if the designation of 'black experience' isn't already under the 'human' umbrella term."

¹⁴ Here Robbins is focusing primarily to the very frequently cited and contested observation that Silliman makes in his 1988 essay "Poetry and the Politics of the Subject" that "Progressive poets who identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history—many white male heterosexuals, for example—are apt to challenge all that is

this “significantly complicates our reading of the movement’s subsequent disavowal of a poetics of identity” (345). Robbins argues that “the eventual positioning of Language writing as opposed to lyric poetry, with the latter genre repeatedly linked to writing by people of color, subtly contributes to the impression that political poetry by the socially marginalized is historically not experimental” (349). Jessica Lewis Luck in “Entries on a Post-Language Poetics in Harryette Mullen’s *Dictionary*,” takes up a similar concern, arguing that “understanding experimental poetics solely within this paradigm affords a reductive picture of many avant-garde poetic projects that seem, like Mullen’s, to reveal not only a discursively constructed subject but also an embodied person or persons at work behind the poem” (360). I am interested in following their lead. As such, in order to discuss Mullen’s work without re-inscribing this unhelpful and inherently racist dualism, I will look at how her work similarly collapses the dualism of the writerly and speakerly texts, opposing the bourgeois conceptions of archive and preservation with the inherent ephemerality of the polyvocal, multivalent text. Ultimately, Mullen’s work shows us not that we can bridge the gap between the speakerly and the writerly text, but that this gap was always artificial, developed in order to continue to silence the voices of the marginalized in poetry, and to keep the reader at a safe and non-intervening distance from the text.

The collapsing of the divide between experimental and racialized writing is grounded in the collapse of the supposed divide between texts that privilege aural and orality (what Mullen

supposedly “natural” about the formation of their own subjectivity. That their writing today is apt to call into question, if not actually explode, such conventions as narrative, persona and even reference can hardly be surprising. At the other end of this spectrum are poets who do not identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history, for they instead have been its objects. The narrative of history has led not to their self-actualization, but to their exclusion and domination. These writers and readers—women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the “marginal”—have a manifest political need to have their stories told. That their writing should often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to whom is the subject of these conventions, illuminates the relationship between form and audience” (61). Since then, Silliman’s observations have been repeatedly attacked, first by Leslie Scalapino (their communication is beautifully summarized in Bob Perelman’s *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History*), but since in criticism by Sianne Ngai, Nathaniel Mackey, and Timothy Yu.

calls “speakerly” texts) and formally/visually experimental text (which she terms, following Barthes, “writerly”). In “Poetry and Identity,” she not only argues that the anomalous black writer gets elided when we maintain these divides, but also that writing by black writers will be at a disadvantage if they continue to prioritize orality over writing. This is made even clearer in “African Signs and Spirit Writing” when she insists that “any theory of African-American literature that privileges a speech based poetics, or the trope of orality, to the exclusion of more writerly texts will cost us some impoverishment of the tradition” (671). Mix also brings this to the fore of her studies of Mullen, arguing that the marginalization of the experimental racialized author occurs “because of a set of assumptions perpetuated by scholars of experimental writing and scholars of African American writing; the former group seeks ‘writerly texts,’ while the latter seeks ‘speakerly’ ones” (38). Following Mullen, Mix also suggests that collapsing the divide between speakerly and writerly texts works to enrich both camps. For Mix, Mullen’s poetry and criticism “demonstrates what we risk losing if we don’t rebuild our frameworks for understanding experimental traditions” (39). Clearly, an analysis, and eventually a collapsing, of the divide between the speakerly and writerly text is central not only to an understanding of Mullen’s work, but also an understanding of her place in the field of contemporary poetry. A look to the issue of the speakerly and writerly text is necessarily a look towards where and how Mullen envisions a more primary space for her reader(s) in her poetry

This is, to some degree, what Frost notes in the introduction to her interview with Mullen when she suggests that Mullen’s aversion to the rules of genre allows her greater freedom for improvisation and freeplay. She argues that Mullen “combin[es] a concern for the political issues raised by identity politics with a poststructuralist emphasis on language” (397), and that, in this combination, she is afforded a freedom unavailable to a writer seeking to follow any one school.

Frost uses the terminology of play throughout, arguing that in “[e]liding supposed divisions between ‘writerly’ and ‘speakerly’ texts, and rejecting Romantic ‘inspiration’ and authorial mastery” Mullen is afforded the childlike freedom to compose “by the rules of a game she makes up along the way” (398). To this end, Frost asserts that the results are poems that are “encoded but ultimately decipherable” (398); that—in keeping with the theme of this project—Mullen’s poems are meaningful, but are not necessarily expressive. Mullen’s work, especially in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, complicates the role of the author precisely by breaking down the divide between the speakerly and the writerly text, between orality and visual form. She does this, in part, by approaching a poetics of *aurality* rather than orality.

This distinction requires some explanation. Mullen’s engagement with sound, always already mediated by the visual appearance of the text on the page, is related to the argument, based in LANGUAGE poetics, that the orality of a text is necessarily preceded by aural. This concern is articulated by Charles Bernstein in *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998). Here, Bernstein writes that “[o]rality can be understood as a stylistic or even ideological marker or a reading style; in contrast, the audiotext might more usefully be understood as aural—what the ear hears . . . *Aurality precedes orality*, just as language precedes speech” (13). By positioning the audiotext against the written text, Bernstein asserts that the aural precedes the oral; or, more particularly, the way that a text *sounds* (the way it makes its sounds, its vocalizing, its orality) is contingent upon a preexisting aural that necessarily precedes the text. In her article on *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, Luck sees this division in action. She writes: “Here is the aural that precedes orality that Bernstein writes about, the experimental cacophony that precedes the voice, speech, and presence of a human self” (370). For Luck, Mullen’s work collapses the speakerly/writerly divide by being interested in aural rather than

orality (although, of course, aurality in text is impossible—it is always mimetic, always mediated by written language), a choice that refuses the preservation and archivation of the writerly text in favour of the ephemerality and impermanence of the aural. She encourages the maintenance of some aurality in her work; gibberish and nursery-rhyme sounds, homophones and homonyms, rewritings and aural wordplays all relish in the temporary nature of the aural and resist the homogenizing tendency of the grapheme to reduce the aural to the oral, to a “stylistic marker” in Bernstein’s terms.

As with nearly every discussion of aurality/orality in Mullen’s work, I must here defer to her often-quoted statement in the aforementioned Frost interview when she discusses the terms of her own orality. She tells Frost:

I am writing for the eye and the ear at once. ... When we talk about orality, most of the time we are not really talking about orality—we are talking about a mimetic representation. Poetry does come out of song. If it gets very far from song it is difficult for many people to connect with it. So I am always experimenting with how to be in that space, where it’s neither completely spoken nor completely something that exists on the page. (401)

For Mullen, experimenting with a form that is neither purely writerly nor purely speakerly is an attempt to engage more fully with readers; in line with a postanarchist poetics, she looks to “connect” with her audience, to engage them affectively, rather than to express herself to them. But, as Matthew Hart is quick to note, Mullen also “admits to the ‘mimetic representation’ that underpins all textual representations of orality” (156). Nonetheless, Hart maintains that Mullen’s work still occupies “the productive space between the ‘completely spoken’ poem and the reified thing ‘that exists on the page’” (ibid). This desire to connect affectively rather than express

mimetically flourishes in the realm of the aural/oral; the ephemerality of aurality is vastly more open to multiple reader interpretations than the more traditional and closed off signification of the purely mimetic and thus exegetical text.

The poem “Free Radicals” (29) brings this tension to the fore by way of the bizarre image of a dinner party in a museum, marked by the organizer making *kimchee*, the Korean fermented cabbage dish, for the guests. Mullen writes: “Now she’s making *kimchee* for the museum that preserved her history in a jar of pickled pig feet” (29). As with any quotation from Mullen’s, the potential readings of these two sentences are rich and inexhaustible. This passage stresses immediacy (begins “Now”), coinciding with the present-progressive action of “making” which must necessarily be read against the past-tense of the museum that “preserved.” Mullen juxtaposes the action of making kimchee and the preservation of a museum, drawing implicit attention to the fact that kimchee, as a fermented food, is already in a process of degradation, of rotting; moreover, kimchee does not keep long, and as it sits in the refrigerator its taste changes, becoming progressively more sour until inedible. Pickling, on the other hand, is the museum of food preparation; pickled or preserved foods are designed to keep well, easily and neatly compartmentalized on store shelves or in household pantries. “Her”¹⁵ history gets preserved in a jar of pig’s feet, the kind of meat traditionally discarded by Western culture, but notoriously consumed by cultural Others. Pickled pig’s feet, interestingly, are featured in both traditional Korean cuisine as well as Black comfort food of the American South. The sentence that follows seemingly paratactically makes this cultural reading metapoetic. Mullen writes, “They’d fix her oral tradition or she’d trade her oral fixation” (29). In this sentence, the museum as metonym for

¹⁵ Mullen tells Henning that the “she” in this poem is also her “artist friend Yong Soon Min” who organized a group meal, called “Kimchi Xtravaganza” for the “Korean American Museum” (73).

tradition and canon, and particularly its interest in preservation of the writerly text, looks to *fix*¹⁶ *orality*. Bookended by an either/or dichotomy, Mullen offers two options to the racialized experimental poet, her “anomalous black writer”: either oral tradition is stabilized and preserved, or we forfeit our desire for the oral. Neither option seems particularly viable, especially since the use of the psychoanalytic term “oral fixation” in this case signals both the fetishization and infantilization of the cultural traditions associated with orality and the speakerly text.

The way out, she seems to suggest, is accepting a liminal space between the terms of speakerly and writerly text, a space marked by culture, and thus synthetic (but not in the Hegelian sense). Rather, Mullen asserts elsewhere that culture is necessarily synthetic, and the synthetic is best understood as the multiple:

Culture, by definition, is synthetic. Human beings transform organic processes and synthesize natural resources in order to create cultural artifacts. ... Culture changes continually in order to respond to changing environment. So, culture is a dynamic interaction of tradition and innovation. (“Everything” 1014-15)

Synthetic culture is, to some extent, then, arbitrary and ephemeral, necessarily resisting the pickling preservation of the “museum.” This is what Hart talks about when he discusses the inherent impurity of Mullen’s vernaculars, writing that she “synthesizes different vernaculars—all of them ‘black,’ but none of them ‘pure’—as part of a wider interest in the ‘cultural and discursive practices by which evolving identities are recognized, articulated, and defined” (155).

The impurity is a gesture towards the aural, obscured always by mimesis, the representational function of print. This becomes clear in the reading process, which Mullen characterizes as a

¹⁶ Comment by Andy Weaver (25/2/2014): “When you discuss ‘fix’ in Mullen’s, ‘They’d fix her oral tradition or she’d trade her oral fixation’ (29), I think you can work through the pun in ‘fix’ more directly than you do (both to correct and to pin down/stabilize).”

translation; when asked about the literal translation of her work, she responds: “Of course, meaning may be altered or lost as new readers are gained, but the translator’s work is not so different from what any reader does in the process of comprehending and interpreting a poem” (“Everything” 1015). Each reading is a translation, a connection with the poem that attempts to see through the mediating language of print, and of orality, and to work towards the aural that precedes it but can never be described. Reading towards the aural in its ephemerality, its intangibility, refuses the archive and its insistence on preservation. This destabilizes not only the impure oral that is mimetically represented, but the written language as well. So it is telling that when Frost asks Mullen about the apparent organization of the visual form of the quatrain poems in *Muse & Drudge*, asserting that “the visual form of the poem is fixed and very symmetrical—those four quatrains per page,” Mullen quips simply, “[i]t looks more stable than it is” (411). This instability, I will assert throughout the remainder of this chapter, is precisely the locus of Mullen’s radical reader engagement; it is in the instability of form—both *Muse & Drudge*’s quatrains and *Sleeping with the Dictionary*’s prose poems—that the text is opened for the intervening, postanarchist reader to insert him or herself.

Transporting the Reading Self: Spahr’s *Response* to Subjectivity

As my situation of Spahr alongside the other poets of my dissertation suggests, she is also writing both in and away from a tradition of experimental poetry that has long been preoccupied with the suppression¹⁷ of the self. But, owing to the fact that Spahr, like Mullen, is writing quite

¹⁷ Comment by Andy Weaver (1/2/2014): “And a niggling little question: is ‘eradication’ the right word in your first sentence? Would your authors agree to that degree, or is it more an act of limiting or distancing?”

Response (4/2/2014): “Yes, you are correct. Eradication is too strong of a word, and I used it to make the comparison seem more dramatic—caught me. I agree that it’s not accurate, and that those authors would also agree with you.”

a bit later than the poets of my first two chapters, her work is also highly influenced by the LANGUAGE school of poetry that saw this suppression of individual subjectivity as one necessarily grounded in semiotics, form, and language itself. It is this preoccupation that Katy Lederer points to when she writes in her review that Spahr in *Response* is “a poet unwilling to clutter her writing with the signs of her own subjectivity” (140). It is inarguable that *Response* marks a clear grappling with the issues of subjectivity and the self. But rather than removing the signs of authorial subjectivity, as Lederer would have us believe, *Response* marks the initial moments of Spahr’s ongoing interest in a startling paradox of subjectivity in the experimental poem: that in order to be truly communal, we require individual subjectivity; that, in being truly communal, we disrupt and disfigure our individual subjectivities.¹⁸ This paradox, I argue, is central to the notions of community and the common that permeate her work; *Response* demonstrates Spahr’s first forays into this paradox, which she eventually satisfies via her use of this project’s titular [generic pronoun].

To begin looking at the paradox of subjectivity in *Response*, we must first look to Spahr’s concept of authorship, which recalls Mac Low’s arguments in my first chapter about the author as an initiator. In “A, B, C,” she outlines a concept of the author as an initiator of choices rather than the controller of a text, thus including the reader in the production of textual meaning on a radically communal level. “An author,” she writes, “is the person who originates or gives

¹⁸ Comment by Andy Weaver (1/2/2014): “When you write ‘that in order to be truly communal, we require individual subjectivity; that, in being truly communal, we disrupt and disfigure our individual subjectivities,’ I’m curious how specific to Spahr you see this notion. I’d say the same could be said for at least Cage and Duncan, and probably your other authors, too. How much of a touchstone is this notion throughout your project (and theirs)? Perhaps you could expand on this point, either acknowledging a larger connection throughout the authors, and/or discussing the differences or nuances that separate the authors?”

Response (4/2/2014): “So, yes. I think that in working through these plateaus I’ve come to realize that part of what postanarchism can do with literature is allow this seemingly paradoxical situation. It encourages us to look for subjectivity even as we look for its disruption. I definitely see it in the other authors in my diss. I’ll have to incorporate it into my introduction.”

existence to something” (284). As initiator, the author needs to involve readers in the production of meaning, and so leaves much of the process of meaning-making incomplete. In a radical poetics that embraces inclusivity, the terms of author and reader need, in some way, to be conflated, and the boundaries need to be blurred. Spahr sees this enacted in Stein’s work when she writes: “Here is a confusion of subject, address, and identity. Here a new poetics of the subject is scripted” (286). This scripting of a new, radical poetics of subjectivity is enacted, for Spahr, in Stein’s work *par excellence*. Spahr writes that in Stein’s reliance on readers to engage in meaning-making themselves, she relinquishes some of the authority of the author. Rather than a controlling presence imposing meaning upon the chosen words, Spahr observes that “[i]n Stein’s work the authority of the author is hiding behind the door, is translated, is denied” (287). Let us, for a moment, leave the finality of a term like “denied” and focus instead on Spahr’s diction in “translated,” a term that defines Stein’s approach to authorship as at once purely linguistic, moving, and altering.¹⁹ In contrast to this, “denied” is final, perhaps, but it also

¹⁹ Comment by Jonathan Vandor (5/1/2014): “When you discuss Spahr’s reading that ‘[i]n Stein’s work the authority of the author is hiding behind the door, is translated, is denied,’ your analysis seems to take authority as itself constitutive of identity/authorship. Do you see a difference between a mobile authority and a mobile authorship, and if so, how do you see this playing out?”

Response (17/1/2014): “So author and authority are intrinsically linked in the way that an author presumes to have control over a. the words that she uses, and b. the way those words mean/will be received.”

Response by Jonathan Vandor (20/1/2014): “Ooh, [that’s] a doozy: it’s such a complicated issue in one seemingly simple statement. I don’t know if it’s that simple: for one, there’s the post-Freudian issues (his eponymous slips). For another, there are the poets who try to write without authority (I’m thinking of Stein and her attempts to be a conduit, rather than a scriptor: plus, there’s the issue that her style generally invites the ‘authority’ of the reader to make sense of it, even when it’s purposefully stymied). For a third, there are those who invoke authority without authorship (akin to Duchamp’s readymades). There’s also the issue of, for the lack of an accepted term, passive-aggressive authority. I’m personally very interested by the end of Charlotte Bronte’s last novel, *Villette*: it’s purposefully left ambiguous for the sake of her father, who wanted a happy ending (she kills off the male object of desire in a shipwreck). Rather than change the ending (to obey his authority), she offers, in her protagonist-narrator’s voice, the expectation of his return, a ‘generalist’ account of shipwrecks, and the following (penultimate) sentence: ‘Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life.’ Authority is deferred on two levels: to her father’s guidance, and the reader’s imagination. But of course, the latter

acknowledges the persistence of the lyric “I” in poetry, a persistence we must resist, must shut the door upon, must deny. The authorial subject in poetry seems to demand representation; a postanarchist reading practice, like the one Spahr proposes, seeks to unsettle these demands. That is, Spahr’s poetry may work to limit authorial subjectivity, but she also knows that, like the previous poets in this project did, the completely unegoic is impossible.

If *Response* teaches us nothing else, it shows us that the construction of the subject is inevitable. In fact, the collection takes this for granted, rather than grappling with this knowledge as Cage and Mac Low did. The unnamed speaker of *Response* states, plainly and conversationally, “we know we are all constructed” (“Responding: V” 8), as if the social construction of the self is a widely accepted (and easily accepted) truth. Once the text accepts social construction as a starting point, it is then free to move, supporting a conception of the individual subject that is in flux, always in motion, recalling the transformative suggestion of authorship as translation above. Supporting this reading, Spahr suggests, also in “A, B, C,” that “reading is an act of transport. Transport is a word of instability” (283). Recalling the *ekstasis* that so intrigued Mac Low, or the shifting point-of-view that destabilized Levertov’s political poems, Spahr here proposes a self as fold,²⁰ turning in on itself and moving beyond. This is

authority is a spurious one. And I don’t think this is quite an ‘exception proves the rule’ scenario: it seems more likely to me right now that the fiction of authorship-means-authority has been forwarded for a long time (or vice-versa: I think Pope argues that no poet can give more than he or she intends in his ‘Essay on Criticism’), but isn’t essentially true.”

²⁰ Comment by Jonathan Vandor (5/1/2014): “Do you mean ‘fold’ in terms of what you might do to a piece of paper, or in terms of the area for holding livestock? The latter has implications for the idea of the commons, I think, as well as for the idea of the self as a collection of identities and interdependencies. But I might be grasping at straws here.”

Response (17/1/2014): “Hadn’t thought of this element of fold. Was using it in the way Deleuze does, especially in his work on cinema. I love this idea, though. Interdependent, certainly!!”

Response by Sean Braune (27/7/2014): “I really loved your discussion of the fold here and while you mention in the

perhaps best demonstrated by the image of the woman in “thrashing seems crazy” with multiple personality disorder who comes to believe that one of her alternate personalities, a man, is stalking her. The image displays both the inherent *splitness* of the self, and the political import of physical bodies. The section displays perfectly Spahr’s dual comprehension of selfhood as “self turns on self / the knife enters at a point that the self could not have reached but did” (31-32).

Both identitarian politics and the complete refusal of identity are too easy for Spahr, and lead us into the same problems that anarchist activists on both sides of the argument would avoid.

A way out of this binarism is proposed by Sophie Mayer in “Aggregators: RSS (Radically Subversive Syndication) Poetics,” wherein she discusses Spahr’s approach to subjectivity. Of course, the disruption of the self, Mayer is quick to note, is not new, and Spahr’s tools themselves are not new either. That is, Mayer observes that “Spahr ... disperse[s her] lyric ‘I’[] through postmodern poetics of quotation, repetition, and bricolage” (48), three of the mainstays of postmodernism that have become tired and ineffectual as a poetics and politics. What we need, Mayer argues instead, is a rethinking of the self, a concept she draws directly from *Response*: “as we rethink our selves, the political enters / and the issue twists to become about our ability to touch information / to make our own decisions” (“testimony: V” 33-35). For

comments section that you were working off Deleuze I guess I sort of wanted more of a Spahr-Deleuzean fold. This is especially the case because the fold reference comes shortly before discussing split subjectivity in Spahr (which is decidedly Lacanian) while the fold is decidedly Deleuzean. Considering the ancient war between the psychoanalytical and schizoanalytical camps I thought that Spahr may be acting like a sort of bridge (or Spahr’s conception of subjectivity). Deleuze first theorizes the fold after Foucault (particularly Foucault’s work on madness in which insides and outsides converge) and I wonder to what extent the Spahr fold that you suggest is Deleuzean or Foucauldian and to what extent the split subjectivity is Lacanian?”

Response (28/7/2014): “I like this idea of Spahr functioning as a kind of bridge between psychoanalytic and schizoanalytic camps, but I think that’s something I’m (and you’re?) putting onto the text because we both see the need for such a bridge. I think that more realistically, my use of ‘splitness’ and split subjectivity is a sloppy gesture towards Lacan that I can’t actually back up. I was thinking more about Deleuze (as I always am, always will be), after his book on Foucault. New folds, new subjectivities. (read: not that whole thing about Leibniz and the house and the attic and whatever—I totally didn’t understand that).”

Mayer, in an effective and effectual radically political poetics we “need to ‘rethink our selves’ in light of the radical tropes of alienation and connection highlighted by global war and global media” (49). Supporting this, Mayer defers to Judith Butler’s concept in *Precarious Life* of a politics of interdependence and interconnectivity: “we’re undone by each other, ... and if we’re not, we’re missing something” (23). Mayer observes that in Spahr’s poetry, poetics, and criticism, the “[r]eader, poet, and subject are interdependent, made vulnerable (in Butler’s term) by ‘shock and awe,’ by the rending violence that gently informs ... Spahr’s swift changes of focus” (50). The very movement implied by Spahr’s shifts in subjectivity, in point-of-view, in authorship serve to disrupt the ordered, taking a particularly obvious page from Stein’s own mandates. And this process (of flux, of movement) is more valuable, for Spahr, than an identitarian politics could ever be: “more than identity our attraction is to puzzle / the lineage” (46-7). But, none of this answers the question *Response* asks so persistently. That is, “how much self can be removed and the self remain?” (“witness: V” 5). Or, can we disrupt subjectivity in order to expose a more useful conception of selfhood as interdependence?

In the end, for Spahr, it’s a question of pronouns, themselves literal representations of selves in language. Pronouns preoccupy Spahr throughout *Response* and well after. In 2005, nearly ten years after *Response* was published, interviewer Michael Boyko poses a question to Spahr about subjectivity in her work, and she responds tellingly: “I keep thinking pronouns all the time. Somehow pronouns have become the most loaded parts of language for me” (n.p). Pronouns get complicated in *Response* through their turn to complete generic states, but it is important to note that the genericization of the pronoun is always complicated itself. For example, in “responding: 1” Spahr writes of a “[gendered pronoun]” who “wanders in this place / [searching / [waiting]” (2-4). Despite the almost humorous lack of specificity, the [gendered

pronoun] is able to move between the localized “this place” and the flux of open movement denoted by “wanders,” “[searching,” and “[waiting.” The latter two progressive verbs are bracketed without close, implying even greater instability. They still represent transport, movement. The example that is my project’s namesake, “[generic pronoun] creates” (10), demonstrates that the blurring of subjectivity is, can still be, productive.

Spahr’s approach to the pronoun sees a dramatic shift in the nearly ten years between *Response* and *thisconnection*, where the pronoun “we” is used frequently in an almost Steinian repetition. Spahr explains this turn to “we” to Boyko in the interview, which I quote at length:

I started with “we” because I wanted to start with together. ... And I wanted everyone to be there in the poem. I wanted “we” to include those who read it. And then I wanted when I turn to “I” to talk about how that moment of becoming individuals, becoming distinct and disconnected, is part of the problem. And I wanted more specifically to talk about my own complicity with this. ... I guess I felt I had to stand up and take responsibility and be there in the poem at some point. That I couldn't hide in the “we.” And I also wanted the reader to think about their individualism with me. (n.p)

In sum, Spahr suggests in this passage, and throughout *Response*, that we need subjects in order to connect with other subjects, to be interdependent, complicit in each other’s individualism. That’s the core paradox of *Response*, and of her work more generally. In recognition of selves, we blur lines: rethink, translate, transport, read.

As I discussed at the start of this chapter, “The 90s” demonstrates a view of contemporary anglophone literary movements as either supporting a traditional view of standard English and upholding its values, or else attempting to disrupt the normative linguistic structures

of standard English. Unsurprisingly, Spahr's article sides with those varied and various movements in poetry that work to disrupt traditional or normative structures of semiotics. Her own poetry, as demonstrated so clearly in *Response*, is always interested in the disruption of standardized language practices. *Response* is interested in transgression and fracture, especially of the signifying and representational qualities of language. This interest provokes one of the collection's most resounding lines: "things that once meant nonsense now carry meaning" ("witness: III" 2). While more sensical than the asyntactic writings of Cage and Mac Low, Spahr's interest in the disruption of standardized language practices is designed to disrupt the very signifying and representational functions of standard English to propose a new mode of articulation, and this practice, for Spahr, is also decidedly feminist. Her concept of new modes of articulation beyond the limitations of standard English begins, first and foremost, with a skepticism of the representational mode of Saussurian linguistics. She poses a need for new modes of articulation that are not purely representational, and therefore do not rely wholly on the authority of the author to imbue meaning into signifiers. In "A, B, C," she suggests that this new process of expression must begin where traditional modes of expression fail: "As telling drains, what is spoken of here requires new modes of articulation" (285). Recalling Wittgenstein, she calls this mode of linguistic operation "telling," characterizing it as the language game of giving information, and one she is weary of because it poses a danger of limitation and overcoding. But, rather than conceding that what we cannot speak we must pass over in silence, Spahr—like Mullen—refuses silence and opts instead for a breaking down of the constituent structures of "telling." She takes up an interest in words as connectives, wherein they are recognized materially as conglomerates of letters: "A letter is part of a word. Only *a* and *i* have the status of words themselves—the beginning and the self. When anybody can name, it is not that there is no

authorization, but rather that what is authorized is the letter *b* (let her be), which is given to the reader” (“A, B, C” 287). In this formula, “let her be” complicates representation, and comes out of the relinquishing of “authorization,” of the process of authoritative authorship on which both expression and representation rely. This is a move to more material, politically effective and readerly affective poetry that refuses the guise of representation, of metaphor.²¹ *Response* demonstrates this move throughout, as when Spahr writes of “an unreal world called real because it is so heavily metaphoric” (“responding: II” 9). In *Response*, language’s metaphorical, representation mode affords it the power to create new realities in order to obscure material ones; by disrupting language structures and transgressing linguistic borders, we move to a new mode of articulation grounded in material and affect (grounded in the reader rather than the author).

This new mode of articulation is an inherent feminist practice in that it is necessarily a grappling with phallogocentrism and the inherent gendering of language. But, it is too simple to characterize Spahr’s work as anti-expressive or anti-phallogocentric; instead, we see in Spahr an attempt to navigate a paradox not unlike the paradox of the self that I discuss above. The paradox of the feminist experimental writer is one that Sianne Ngai has examined closely in her book *Ugly Feelings* (2009), and Ngai even uses Spahr as one of the examples of a contemporary writer who explicitly deals with this paradox. For Ngai, the paradox of language that the contemporary feminist avant-gardist faces is clear: s/he must decide either to refuse the binary (and thus ignore it) or to interrogate it and thus risk inadvertently supporting it. On the one hand, Ngai writes,

²¹ Comment by Andy Weaver (2/2/2014): “I think a few of those points might need a bit of clarification. Early on in the plateau, there’s a bit of a confusion of terminology, I think. So, at one point you write that ‘In this formula, “let her be” functions as anti-representational, and is borne out of the relinquishing of “authorization,” of the process of authoritative authorship that both expression and representation rely on.’ But is ‘let her be’ actually anti-representational? Or is it a different, punning challenge of normative representationality (to me, it seems more like an example of Duncan’s ‘multiphasic’ language)? Later on, you use the terms ‘anti-expressive’ and ‘anti-phallogocentric’—I wonder if one of these terms (perhaps the latter?) would be more effective/precise? (Perhaps the problem stems from quickly name-checking Lyotard and then starting briefly down that path before swerving away, but not adjusting terminology to reflect that swerve?)”

“[f]or the feminist writer, the stance that form is political implies that there is no politically neutral language and, by extension, no language uninflected by gender and its ideological codes” (316). The choice becomes either to follow a “tradition dominated by male modernists and valorized by afeminist poststructuralist theorists” or else to engage in “a strategic *reappropriation* of ‘feminine’ form” (316). If these options are unsatisfactory, the alternative is to accept the position

that the attachment, even the critical attachment of gender codes to language promotes the restriction of women to certain kinds of expression and in fact perpetuates binary gender divisions and the hierarchies inevitably accompanying them. This position culminates in a feminist need to insist that linguistic categories should not be gendered, even in aesthetic or critical efforts to challenge past ways in which forms and genres certainly *have* been gendered. (317, *emph. Ngai’s*)

The goal here, of course, is to “do away with the concept of ‘feminine form’ altogether” (317). From this discussion, Ngai identifies the central paradox of the feminist experimental poet. “[I]f one adheres too strongly to either of the positions circumscribed by the ‘politics of form’ position,” she writes, “one runs the risk of asserting ‘no language is code-free’ to a degree that leaves one stuck with the task of constantly negotiating between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ categories, inadvertently strengthening them” on the one hand, and on the other, perhaps more dangerously, “one runs the risk of dangerously underestimating the pervasiveness of gender ideology in all cultural forms” (317). Spahr grapples with this, too, as Ngai goes on to observe. She writes that in *Response*, Spahr “deliberately occupies the boundary between these

possibilities by using the ‘generic’ phrasing” (317-8), the same “generic” phrasing that gives this project its title.²²

I, too, would like to examine Spahr’s grappling with representation and genericism through one very interesting example; in the fourth section of “responding,” Spahr writes, “[generic pronoun] wished to reduce writing to the zero level where it is without meaning. When culture invades private life on a large scale [generic pronoun] said the individual cannot escape being raped” (33). A few lines later, this long line is separated into a list structure that sees the language sputter:

[my zero-level writing
 [generic pronoun] said
 protest rape
 [generic pronoun] said
 my zero-level writing
 [generic pronoun] said
 dangerous cultural rape
 [generic pronoun] said
 my zero-level writing
 my zero-level writing (37-46)

In order to begin discussing this section, I should first identify its obscure intertextuality. The

²² Comment by Andy Weaver (2/2/2014): “I’m a bit confused by your description of Ngai’s points. I think your discussion slightly confuses the two sets of choices she offers: if I understand her argument, the larger choice she offers is whether to accept that language is gendered or to deny that; the second set of choices she mentions is a subset of the ‘accept language is gendered’ stance, which is to decide between working in a masculine modernist form or to reappropriate a feminist form. You understand this point much better than I do, but I think the discussion gets confused at several points (partly from a lack of clear definitions for each stance, I think, and so the descriptors shift a bit throughout your discussion). The confusion comes to a head, for me, in the section when you write ‘The goal here, ... ideology in all cultural forms’” (317). I think you need to clarify Ngai’s options more precisely.”

wording here is borrowed from a quotation by Ni Haifeng, a Chinese avant-garde artist and writer that Spahr almost certainly came across through Andrew Solomon's *New York Times Magazine* article, "Their Irony, Humor (and Art) Can Save China" (1993), which discusses the radical political potentials of the contemporaneous Chinese avant-garde. The full quotation from the article reads as follows:

In 1987, he began to paint on houses, streets, stones, trees and he covered his island with strange marks in chalk, oil paint and dye. He has said that he wished to reduce writing to the "zero level" where it is without meaning. "When culture invades private life on a large scale," he said, "the individual cannot escape being raped." From this viewpoint, my zero-level writing can be taken as a protest against the act of rape. I also want to warn people of the dangers inherent in cultural rape. (par 46)

By adapting Ni's words and Solomon's writing, Spahr seems to suggest that a "zero-level writing"—a writing with literally no meaning—is impossible and politically dangerous, running the risk of underestimating how the violence of social institutions like gender necessarily inflect language. Standing in stark contrast to the insertion of the bracketed generic pronoun, the specific and overtly political "protest rape" and "dangerous cultural rape" refuse to tip Spahr's writing towards either side of the paradox: they neither insist on a feminine form, nor ignore the gendered inflections of language altogether. The lack of gender specificity of the generic pronoun repeated throughout this passage (nowhere in the collection is its use so pervasive) both suggests the openness and receptiveness that characterizes the feminine form for Ngai, and also refuses a clearly delineated binarism. In the end, the short, indented lines quoted above begin with "[my zero-level writing]" which never sees its bracketing closed. Spahr suggests the radical

potentials here of a tightrope walk between two dangerous sides of the feminist experimental paradox; she neither supports nor refuses, embracing a postanarchic alternative rather than giving in to one side or another. It is the sputtering, the stuttering that produces a new mode of articulation.

Writing the Minor

The way that Mullen uses minor²³ language²⁴ has not been given adequate attention in the existing scholarship. Typically, critics tend to focus on the ways that Mullen concedes that, while there is a degree of arbitrariness to the codification of identity, these markers are still important elements of individual subjectivity. As Robbins notes in her discussion of *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, while we must understand Mullen's work as "a direct response to those arguing for the abandonment of race as a topic inappropriate to discussions of avant-garde art," we also find in her work a "concession that while racial identity is in a sense theoretically 'arbitrary,' every subject of the social order is nevertheless assigned a position and set of meanings based on these arbitrary markers" (361). It is clearly not enough for Mullen to either hold to an essential racial identity (a now outmoded practice) nor is it helpful for her to advocate the complete eradication of identitarian markers (which is, I should hope, similarly outmoded). As a way of negotiating

²³ Comment by Andy Weaver (16/3/2014): "I don't think you've fully defined/explained/worked through the concept of 'minor voice' in the entry. That term keeps popping up here, but you don't actually explicitly define it—and you seem to use it for several allied but different things. For example, in the fourth paragraph (which begins 'Ondaatje's work'), you seem to imply that there is something necessarily inclusive in the minor voice (though I might be misunderstanding your point here)—if so, why?"

²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari use the term minor (or minoritarian) literature in their work *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*. Minor language, for them, can be characterized by three important features: first, it is marked by a deterritorialization of a major language, written as the bastardized and appropriated version of a colonial language (16); second, it is designed "to connect immediately to politics" (17); third, and most importantly for my project, it is communal and collective, necessarily inclusive of those voices a major or colonial voice would look to silence (17).

the liminal space between these two attitudes, Mullen adopts the rhetoric and language of the minor especially via this collection's use of the prose poem.

While I will argue that the use of the prose poem form in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* is a gesture towards a community of active readers, it is here only important to note that Mullen's return to the form of the prose poem is motivated by both race and gender. That is, Mullen understands the prose poem, and its relation to the list poem, as a way of approaching the minoritarian voice. She tells Henning, for example, that "[i]t is a minor genre, the prose poem. It's also a list poem, which I thought of as a form congenial to women, who are always making lists" (13). We must also understand the engagement of active readers as a feminist practice insofar as the clearly marked distance between a passive reader and an authoritative, creative author is a distinctly masculinist concept. It is at this point that I must acknowledge the fact that, up until this point, I have discussed the issue of race in Mullen's work much more than that of gender. While this does, perhaps, ignore a crucial element of her work generally, I have chosen to limit my scope here primarily because Mullen offers a unique opportunity to discuss the intersections of racial politics and postanarchist reading practices that the other authors in my project do not. I am not suggesting here that the other authors I study here are raceless, but rather that a critique of race does not appear explicitly in their work.

Returning to the form of the prose poem, Mullen moves from organized verse in *Muse & Drudge*, to the supposedly less stable form of the prose poem in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, fashioning this as an attack on tradition, but not a refusal of it. Instead, Mullen tells Henning that this collection in particular is interested in both "tradition and its rupture, the continuities and discontinuities of cultural transmission, the dissemination and preservation of language, of speech and writing, of meaning itself" (7). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Mullen represents tradition

(and the site of its rupture) in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* through the image of the university. The university is most explicitly represented and critiqued in the poem “Naked Statues,” in which the University of California’s Los Angeles campus, where Mullen is a professor of English, is presented as the locus of an “anglophile race” where “[t]hey read all the great books and perform them in the garden of naked statues” (50). Throughout this poem, Mullen tells Henning, the irony of UCLA’s proximity to Hollywood, and to the concept of American celebrity, is seen as emblematic of the precarious position of the literary canon in a contemporary world where literature is viewed as a kind of minor language on its own. Mullen laments, “I’m continually reminded of our proximity to Hollywood, where books are raw material for movies, and the most recognizable nude statue is called Oscar” (79). The reduction of even the most canonical of texts to the “raw material” for a film is berated in the poem, as in the phrasing of “So romantic are the patient English” (50), where Mullen considers the fact that Michael Ondaatje’s acclaimed novel, *The English Patient*, had been adapted into a film some six years before the publication of this collection (80). The position of *The English Patient* is an interesting one; Ondaatje’s position as a Sri Lankan-Canadian author makes his novel, in some sense, a work of minor literature, and yet its incorporation into the Canadian literary canon and its subsequent inclusion in the syllabi for “Introduction to Canadian Literature” courses everywhere make it simultaneously an image of tradition. Additionally, the film was hailed as a modern classic, famously winning some of its very own “nude statue[s]” and bringing Ondaatje into the popular limelight.

Ondaatje’s work as minor and movie script is an appropriate image for Mullen’s work because, as Spahr observes in her introduction to *Looking Up Harryette Mullen*, Mullen’s engagement with canonicity and tradition is complicated by her unique use of allusion. Spahr

observes that the form of the prose poem, and the frequent use of literary and popular culture references, make the poems in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* particularly inclusive; she writes, “[t]his form lets Mullen suggest that allusion is everything and the poem is a sort of collection box” (“Introduction” i). To avoid a kind of utopian view of inclusivity Spahr is also quick to note “how deeply provisional and full of the everyday Mullen’s allusions are” (“Introduction” ii). She also notes that, for the most part, scholars of Mullen’s work have not really dealt with this issue, arguing that “the scholarship has managed to miss the importance of daily-ness in Mullen’s work” (“Introduction” iii), despite the fact that Henning’s collection of interviews is published in 2010, nearly ten years after Spahr’s *Everybody’s Autonomy*, wherein she discusses Mullen’s allusive form as crucial to her minoritarian form. Mullen’s allusions function to encourage the kind of communal readership both Spahr and I prize by “emphasizing the unfaithful and unowned practices of reading” (102). While *Everybody’s Autonomy* is not an in depth study of Mullen’s allusive form, Spahr does make one interesting and ultimately integral distinction when she argues that we must read these allusions as a kind of sampling rather than a modernist-styled intertextuality (103). While on the surface this distinction may seem arbitrary, contemporary work on issues of sampling and intertextuality demonstrate that the division is clearly political. A closer look at these terms suggests that Mullen’s poetic practice is actually even more in line with a practice of appropriation than of sampling.

As Marcus Boon’s recent book on intellectual property and reproduction, *In Praise of Copying* (2010), suggests, the widespread practice (in music especially) of sampling is a different practice with different motives than the issue of appropriation. Boon’s definition of sampling, the term Spahr uses to describe Mullen’s poetics, is fitting in its association with analog rather than digital culture. He writes that “[t]he word ‘sample’ comes from the way in

which an analog impression of a sound or other source is made and then converted to digital data” (168). As a result, Boon characterizes the sampled text as montage, a term he employs with its implications of Eisenstein and political cinema at large. Essentially, “all sampled objects are, in effect, montages and partake of the same viral power that montage has—which is the power of the fragment, the unfinished, discontinuous partial object” (169). Even the most cursory look at the politics of sampling in Mullen’s work up to and including *Sleeping with the Dictionary* makes clear her fit with this definition. While I think a look at the politics of sampling in Mullen would be a fruitful endeavour, I argue that Boon’s definition of textual *appropriation* is actually vastly more applicable to Mullen’s most recent poetic form. As Boon asserts later in his book, appropriation is a more nuanced practice in that the “question of who gets to appropriate is a fundamental one” (213), and it is a question that is frequently innately tied to issues of racialized identity. Boon is quick to point out, while the colonial mimesis that is frequently discussed by postcolonial theorists is clearly oppressive and silencing, it is important to note that it is always necessarily incomplete. “The mimesis of the colonial subject,” he writes, “always ‘fails’; it is demanded but at the same time repudiated, ensuring that those who are governed but who lack rights are thrown back into the inauthenticity of the mere copy, empty of essence” (215). Drawing attention to the emptiness of this copying functions in the same way as the attention given to invisibility in Hardt and Negri’s conception of identity reclamation. In this sense, Boon asserts that the processes of appropriation can and should be affirmed as having a radical and anti-oppressive potential. As he writes, “[a]ppropriation should be affirmed not only as something done to such cultures, but as a vital and dynamic part of their own self-constitution” (217). I argue that the crux of Mullen’s allusive form is an affirmation of appropriation, the final blow in her attack against the anglophile university and its interest in canon and celebrity.

Mullen's affirmed appropriation in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* is explicit, especially in one of the collection's most popular poems, "Dim Lady" (21), a not-so-subtle appropriation of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130." In this prose-sonnet, Shakespeare's language is reinterpreted through a bizarre mixture of racialized slang, intimate terms of endearment, synthetic stand-ins, and words that barely function as synonyms for those they replace, as in the poem's first line, when "My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun" is translated into "My honeybunch's peepers are nothing like neon" (ibid). I am not interested in dismantling Mullen's line-by-line updating of Shakespeare's sonnet, though that would be interesting and fruitful work.²⁵ On "Dim Lady," Mullen tells Henning that her drastic rewriting of the piece actually retains a good deal of the original information, arguing that the prose poem "remains closer to the meaning of Shakespeare, but I've substituted synonymous slang and commercial brand names. Shakespeare already had lowered the level of diction in his 'Sonnet 130,' which can also be seen as a parody of poetry conventions" (63). Here, Mullen tempers her antagonism in a way that suggests a kinship with Shakespeare, a figure of extreme canonicity who, one would imagine, would be an easy straw man for a poet looking to dismantle a tradition based on racialized appropriation. Shakespeare is an excellent representation of the postcolonial image of the "master's house."

And yet, Mullen responds particularly unfavourably to the notion put forth by Audre Lorde that you cannot dismantle the master's house with the master's tools. She tells Henning, "I never thought this was a helpful metaphor. It seems to me that tools can be used to build or destroy. It all depends on who uses them for what purpose. ... That statement doesn't work on a

²⁵ I do want to add, however, that Mullen's appropriation of Shakespeare here is radically different from her also obvious appropriation of Langston Hughes in "Dream Cycle," the poem that appears on the next page. Because the racial politics of appropriation are radically different, Mullen's allusion to Hughes is markedly less antagonistic (and is, I would argue, at times even reverential). But, Hughes does not get off without any criticism; instead, I would argue that Hughes's appearance in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* is somewhat akin to Ondaatje's. The two authors occupy a strange borderland between canon and minor.

literal level and doesn't really work on the metaphorical level either" (80). Instead, she seems very optimistic about the revolutionary possibilities of appropriation: "You can 'fight the powers that be' by using the same language. Why not? Didn't Audre Lorde speak and write English?" (81). Rather than a kind of colonial mimicry, a mimesis of the master on the part of the colonial subject, Mullen's obviously intentionally imperfect appropriation of Shakespeare (a practice markedly different from both sampling and intertextuality) is a gesture towards what she describes as "Lorde's writing about the power of the erotic and the transformation of silence into language and action" (81). Mullen's appropriation of Shakespeare is, in the end, a transformation particularly because it refuses to buy into the binary logic of colonial language and minor silence. And, to reinvigorate the minor voice, Mullen suggests to Henning that such a transformation is necessary. Appropriation can be affirmed, as Boon suggests, as an integral part of anti-oppressive identity politics, but Mullen tells us that "it takes a kind of mental transformation, so if you buy into the logic of oppression, then you can't see that you could use the language in that way" (Henning 81). At the end of *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, one cannot help but feel as though Mullen demands that kind of transformation in the minds of her readers.

Reading Spahr's as a minor voice is much more difficult; instead, her work turns its attention to the concept of witness, and particularly of the notion of poetic witness which functions in *Response* as a key element of the text's politics. Witness, which for Spahr is intrinsically linked to a politics of testimony, of needing to speak of real, personal experience, and to transcribe suffering, also inherently links Spahr's work back to Levertov's notorious poetics of witness, and the similar processes of recording, witnessing, and testifying that mark feminist poetics at large. Feminist poetics has long grappled with the issue of poetic witness, wanting to transcribe a politic of suffering while remaining aware (and sceptical) of a poetics

that represents or speaks for the other. This same concern features throughout *Response*, as early as its first line which reads: “how to tell without violating?” (“Introduction” 1). Later, Spahr nuances this question even further, asking: “how does one write the question of letters and not appropriate or make bland?” (“witness: III” 11). In a brief e-mail interview, I ask Spahr about the politics of witness in her work, citing specifically that first example. I ask: is it possible to tell without violating? and her answer shocks me. “Probably not,” she states almost matter-of-factly. Then, “That book feels so old to me now. I sort of want to be like wtf was I thinking writing such a dumb question” (n.p). I am taken aback. Why is this suddenly a dumb question? How has poetry changed so that posing such a question seems, to Spahr now, infantile?

I realize that, at its heart, this question of witnessing without violating, about testifying to the lived experience of politic and suffering, is a question of authorship. It asks: can we speak of the other without speaking for the other? Or, more fully, can we speak without betraying what or whom we speak of? These are questions that theorists of various schools have grappled with for decades. Postanarchism responds to this question tentatively, acknowledging that the writing subject occupies a tenuous position of simultaneous solitariness and connectivity, making this process of “telling” both righteous and risky. In the same e-mail Spahr talks about her complicated relationship with the role of the author explicitly. She writes that she recognizes the isolation of individual writing and the inescapability of subjectivity, and that this is a shared concern of many contemporary writers: “Like many writers at the end of the century and the beginning of the next, I’m a little suspicious of the author. And yet I recognize that I write often in isolation and as a subject in late capitalism, or as an author” (n.p). She also recognizes that authorship is not something you can be completely rid of, even if she doesn’t particularly like the idea of the author much herself. She tells, conversationally,

I guess I see authorship as something that is there. I don't like it that much as an idea. And yet it doesn't feel always that one can get rid of it entirely. So I try to think about when to indulge in it and when not. I'm not sure I've made the best decisions. They feel more like they've been made for me. (n.p)

One way of getting around this issue of authorship, Spahr's work more generally tells us, is communal writing²⁶ and a process of refusing an ownership of language. Despite its "wtf"-factor, *Response* insists on two related but necessarily separate things: that a subject position is required if there is to be some form of witness or testimony, and also that "when terrible things happen they must be witnessed" ("witness: I" 1).

It is this position that Alicia Ostriker takes in her notion of postmodern witness, which I also brought into my discussions of Levertov. Because Spahr lists Rukeyser as one of the poets who has influenced her in my e-mail interview with her, applying Ostriker's concept of the postmodern witness is especially fitting as Rukeyser's poetics of feminist witness is crucial to Ostriker's theory. And yet, Spahr and Ostriker meet only halfway. They both agree that "for each time and place there may be appropriately new forms of response to the illness whose two feverish sides are private life and public sphere" (Ostriker 35). And, they both seem to argue that a politically-engaged contemporary poem (formally experimental or not) cannot be either purely written with a clearly defined speaking-self in mind, or purely opposed to conceptions of self/history/fact. Ostriker makes this much clear when she asks:

But how is resistance to be poetically organized? Obviously not by a poetics *purely* of the self. The poem must include history. It must contain the news. But a poetics that *denies* self is also useless; for without a consciousness that desires,

²⁶ Collaborative or communal writing is something Spahr has turned to in recent years, as demonstrated by the collaborative authorship of 2013's *An Army of Lovers*, which she co-wrote with David Buuck.

suffers and chooses, there is no ethical or political model for the reader. (35)

In some sense, they both assert the importance of a present and located self in the poem, which, as I've discussed of Ostriker in my work on Levertov, is a major feature of her concept of the poetics of postmodern witness. For Ostriker, in a poetics of postmodern witness "it is crucial that the poet is *present* and *located* in the poem. The poet is not simply a phantom manipulator of words but a confused actual person, caught in a world of catastrophe that the poem must somehow both mirror and transcend" (35, *emph. Ostriker's*). Though, it is at this point that the two begin to disagree.

While Ostriker seems to accept the possibility of a "confused actual person" in the text unproblematically, Spahr grapples with it constantly, asserting ultimately that this person in the text and his/her position as one of witness ultimately becomes a stupid question. And, it's important to note that Ostriker patently refuses the politics of LANGUAGE poetry where Spahr holds it very important. Ostriker dismisses the radical political potentials of a LANGUAGE poetry that disrupts a writing subject, arguing that

Language poetry, notwithstanding the political posturing of its advocates, seems to me politically vacuous not only because of its captious repartee, and its systemic abandonment of the lyric "I," but because it denies that the morally responsible human subject is even theoretically possible. (35)

In the end, what they can both agree on most clearly is the refusal to keep silent, positing that the only truly apolitical position is one wherein we accept silence in our speech and in our ability to

listen, a moment in which “‘our voices are made silent’ / ‘our ears are made deaf’” (“testimony: III” 28-9).²⁷

My own critiques of Ostriker’s theory of postmodern witness can be best demonstrated through Amy Robbins, who, in her discussion of Alice Notley, identifies the primary problem of Ostriker’s criticism. Robbins notes that Ostriker’s theory seems to accept unproblematically that the self can (and thus should) be represented in the text, an acceptance that needs to be at the very least problematized, if not ultimately refused, by a history of theory and literary criticism that confronts the ability of language to represent anything, let alone a person. Robbins writes: “to claim the presence of a person in language is not an unproblematic contention, as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and other poststructuralists have made clear” (77). Of course, as she is quick to explain, “[m]aterial subjects do not, and cannot, cohere in language—subjects become instead verbal constructs, accumulations of representations that in themselves are merely remnants of desire” (77). Instead, Robbins suggests that Notley’s work makes impossible this present and located “confused person,” by disrupting the “[a]bstract relationships to abstract

²⁷ Comment by Andy Weaver (4/2/2014): “I wonder what Cage would say in reference to this point: ‘what they can both agree on most clearly is the refusal to keep silent, positing that the only truly apolitical position is one wherein we accept silence in our speech and in our ability to listen, a moment in which “our voices are made silent” / “our ears are made deaf”’? Cage seems to suggest a politics of silence (at least in terms of his meaning of ‘silence’ as ‘empty words’), or at least that’s how I like to read his work. Would you agree? If so, is this an impasse, or is there a bridge between Cage’s and Spahr’s stances?”

Response (4/2/2014): “Cage on silence vs Spahr not wanting to be silent. Maybe the bridge is listening, attention, a way out of normativity by finding what one wouldn’t otherwise... But for Cage we get there silently, and for Spahr we get there stuttering. In the end, they’re both noise, just differently (though, to be fair, Spahr is noisy whereas the Cunningham mesostics are noise). Spahr doesn’t want empty words (doesn’t see them as helpful), but she wants them opened.”

Response by Andy Weaver (5/2/2014): “Cage is also working from an Eastern/Zen stance towards silence as necessary for contemplation/connection. Listening/attention would seem to be a possible bridge... but it’s not necessary to have them agree. I’m just curious about how they might/might not overlap.”

notions of the self, one way of describing the reader/text interaction that takes place at the site of Language poetry” (88). Spahr’s work follows in a similar vein.

In the end, Ostriker’s suggestion of representation (and especially the representation of a person) is false, misinformative, and Spahr’s testimony adamantly works against it; “this is about the role of testimony / the claims of truth in the age of cover-up and misinformation”

(“testimony: I” 3). The collection posits testimony as a means of working against a poetics of witness, and as a remedy for it. Spahr’s poetics of testimony, which follows through *Response* and continues throughout her work, is made manifest in the intrusion of news, historical, fact, and testimony in her later collections, *Fuck You – Aloha – I Love You* (2001), *thisconnectionofeveryonewithlungs* (2005), and *well then there now* (2011), a collection of seamlessly intertwined confession and found language that seems to say that telling is a violation, and thus the only politically viable text is one that stutters as it violates (a stuttering that is suggested by the collection’s very title). Ultimately, *well then there now* demands a shift not just away from a process of representation that assumes its potential to witness without violating, but a shift away from that discussion entirely. It offers instead testimony as representation that folds in on itself, becomes so distanced from any real person, no matter how confused, that it is analogy without reference to the real: “analogy from analogy / analogy of analogy” (*well then* 58). Testimony of testimony.

While their poetic projects might seem to be at odds with each other, what we see in Mullen’s radical use of appropriation and in Spahr’s radical repositioning of the postmodern witness is that both women return—albeit sceptically—to the realm of identity. While I will, in my next section, carefully study the complex relationship that each author has with identity and its relationship to her authorial presence, it is at least clear now that both authors see the

complete refusal of subjectivity, of identity, as impossible and as ineffectual as politics or poetics. If it is indeed impossible to tell without violating, as Spahr's e-mail response to me proclaimed so blatantly, then the role of the radical, experimental female poet is a difficult one. She must offer instead testimony and appropriation, knowing full well that some degree of the violence of witnessing will come into play. Nonetheless, these tactics of testimony and appropriation fuel each poet's desire to feel out the fissures and the moments of weakness in a phallogocentricity that would seek to silence them both on gendered and racialized lines. These are both, above all, tactics working at once with and against authorial subjectivity.

Renegade Authors and Reclaimed Identities

At this point I am compelled to turn to the important discussion of how Mullen and Spahr construct their respective authorial identities. Beginning first with Mullen, I argue that her relationship to authorship and authority is complicated in some obvious ways, for example through her use of "sampling" and allusion. What I find most fascinating about selfhood and authorship in this collection in particular is the way the identity politics are simultaneous embraced and put under erasure. The result is an identity politics that recalls the tactics Hardt and Negri discuss in *Commonwealth*. That is, identity in this text seeks flux, but knows that in order to be moved from the oppressive structures of categorizing and overcoding, one must first take control of the means of producing identities, and in so doing turn against those structures. Hardt and Negri describe this process in three steps. The first is to attack invisibility, "to reveal the violence of identity as property and thereby in some sense reappropriate that identity" (327). The second is a "struggle for freedom"²⁸ (330), a new relationship to identity that is no longer

²⁸ It is important to note that, in contrast to many activist movements predicated on identity politics, Hardt and Negri are careful to distinguish "freedom" from "emancipation." They write that "whereas emancipation strives for the freedom of identity, the freedom to be *who you really are*, liberation aims at the form of self-determination and

viewed as property. The final is the “self-abolition of identity” which (332), in an anarchist fashion, “fills the traditional role of *the abolition of property and of the state*” (333, emph. Hardt and Negri’s). While this third step is suggested by the multiplicity of experiential communities, I am most interested in the ways that *Sleeping with the Dictionary* enacts these first two tasks. Robbins seems to suggest these processes when she observes that “Mullen turns from encoded descriptions of the culture’s aggression toward bearers of these various identity markers toward the question of agency, asking how a marked subject can effectively regain control of her personhood in such a hostile climate” (362). I argue that through erasure and exclusion Mullen works to regain control of the production of identity.

Regaining control of “personhood,” or the production of subjectivity, thus involves foregrounding those aspects of identity production that make the marginalized subject invisible or silent. Part of the way that Mullen does this is by putting the lyric “I” under erasure, as many scholars of her work discuss. For example, Luck observes that “[t]hese poems are not the product of a traditional lyric ‘I’ shaping the language to evoke the epiphanies of an essential self. Instead, Mullen conspicuously puts that ‘I’ under erasure” (357). For Luck, this in turn foregrounds the constructedness of political subjectivity, a process that she sees most clearly enacted in Mullen’s collections *Trimmings* and *Muse & Drudge*, collections that “illustrate a shift from writing the ‘I’ to considering the subject and language itself ‘not as transparent but constructed’” (358). This leads her to read “Choice voice noise,” the frequently referenced line in *Muse & Drudge*, as a reference to gaining personal agency, a choice to voice noise, or what would be otherwise passed over. But, we must also read this as a decision to speak in the language of noise, which, as Craig Dworkin argues, moves this politics beyond issues of witness and testimony in that noise has the

self-transformation, the freedom to determine *what you can become*” (333). This element is precisely what distinguishes this form of reading and writing from identitarian politics and classical anarchism in general.

“potential to disrupt the message, to unsettle the code of the status quo, [which] is what makes noise more than simply the record of violence” (39). “Choice voice noise,” in its similarity to slang and baby talk, is one way that Mullen moves towards noise.

While Mullen’s work is never “noise” in the way I argue that Cage’s is, she definitely uses nonsense and marginalized voices that are typically considered to be illiterate or barbaric. This is a way of opening up her work to more potential readers, which she theorizes in “Imagining the Unimagined Reader.” She begins this essay by foregrounding the reader who is silenced before s/he reaches the text because s/he is never imagined, and is thus excluded. She admits to feeling this silencing herself: “There is another kind of experience I sometimes have when reading the words of authors who never imagined that someone like me might be included in the potential audience for their work” (199). This process typically reifies identity through the process of exclusion, in that the text provokes the reader to identify with the markers of their subjectivity that cause their exclusion. Mullen describes this process clearly, writing: “When I read words never meant for me, or anyone like me—words that exclude me, or anyone like me, as a possible reader—then I feel simultaneously my exclusion and my inclusion as a literate black woman, the unimagined reader of the text” (ibid).²⁹ This exclusionary process is based on language itself, which is often used to create a divide between literacy and illiteracy, a divide designed to perpetuate systems of domination. Mullen’s inclusion is equal parts interpolation and

²⁹ Comment by Andy Weaver (12/3/2014): “You seem to ignore half of Mullen’s point in the quotation you offer from ‘Imagining...’ in your 3rd paragraph. Mullen says that ‘... I feel simultaneously my exclusion and my inclusion as a literate black woman, the unimagined reader of the text’—what about that feeling of inclusion, which Mullen seems to find liberating and/or affirming (almost as a form of literary trespassing)? I think there’s something to work through there in relation to your ideas.”

Response (13/3/2014): “You’re right. My interest in exclusion here has led me to basically ignore inclusion here. I think that probably comes from a very non-utopian project that leads me to point out moments of erasure or exclusion first before approaching moments of affirmation and inclusion. This is also the pessimist in me. But, these issues of affinity and inclusion are things I’ve been working through in my readings on Susan Howe lately; I can pretty clearly see how they’d apply to Mullen, though, and I will incorporate them into this section in my revisions.”

intervention; in her reading she works to reclaim the means of producing and interpolating her identity as a “literate black woman” in texts that never imagined her at all. The result is a new relationship to identity that is produced by Hardt and Negri’s “struggle for freedom” (330), an identity that is no longer bound by the concept of property.

Indeed, as Mullen goes on to observe, “[w]hat constitutes literacy has always been determined by the powerful, while illiteracy as an attribute to the disempowered” (ibid). This is part of the reason why she tends towards slang, baby talk, nonsense words, and onomatopoeia, foregrounding “the quirks, contradictions, even the inanities, in the language of the declining Anglo-American empire” (203), an “inclination . . . to pursue what is minor, marginal, idiosyncratic, trivial, debased, or aberrant in the language that I speak and write” (202). By opening up language in this way, and trying to disrupt its exclusionary process, Mullen tries to envision as many readers as possible, but she knows that a completely inclusive text is totally impossible. And yet, as Hardt and Negri insist, Mullen’s politics and poetics are predicated on drawing attention to this exclusion and the silences and invisibilities it creates. She describes this issue at the close of “Imagining the Unexamined Reader,” which I quote at length because I understand it as so central not only to her project but to my own. She writes:

Not when I am writing, but after I have written, I consider who would be left out, excluded from the poem. Although it’s not necessary or possible to include everyone, I find that it is useful to me as a writer to think about the fact that language, culture, and poetry always exclude as well as they include potential audiences. One reason I have avoided a singular style or voice for my poetry is the possibility of including a diverse audience of readers attracted to different

poems and different aspects of the work. I try to leave room for unknown readers
I can only imagine. (203)

One element of exclusion that Mullen does not discuss here³⁰ but that I find hugely important is the issue of the materiality of the text and its distribution. In fact, I would argue that the digital humanities, the process of online self-publication (like my own), and the hypertext model work towards not just imagining unimagined readers, but also placing the text within their reach.³¹

One of the most striking ways that *Sleeping with the Dictionary* foregrounds this process of exclusion is by way of what the poetry itself puts under erasure, what words it conspicuously does not speak. A perfect example of this is the poem “Denigration” (19), a poem that suggests, but refuses to articulate, the racial epithet “nigger” throughout. Instead, the poem repeatedly—

³⁰ Part of the reason that Mullen does not discuss this issue is because the essay is written in 1999, when these digital possibilities did not exist. Another part of that reason is that Mullen tends to dislike technology. For example, while she does note that digital publication of poems, on the “Worldwide Web,” may “virtually expand[] the potential audience beyond those who see my work in books or periodicals,” she also laments the fact that these poems appear online “with or without [her] permission” (“Imagining” 201). Additionally, *Looking Up Harryette Mullen* sees both Mullen and interviewer Barbara Henning lamenting the increasing technologization of writing communities, preferring “snail mail” to e-mail, and typically understanding the digital as inferior to print.

³¹ Comment by Andy Weaver (12/3/2014): “Finally, this is where I get to ‘pretend’ to be a cranky old man. You write that ‘I would argue that the digital humanities, the process of online self-publication (like my own), and the hypertext model work towards not just imagining unimagined readers, but also placing the text within their reach.’ I don’t disagree, but I feel that you’re being just a bit Pollyannaish here, because you imply that hypertext doesn’t have any material limitations. Not everyone owns, likes, or can afford a computer, nor does everyone have easy access to the internet. Granted, small press has a very limited reach, but it is possible that someone could lend or give away a printed book, which can’t really happen online. Finally, it’s theoretically possible for an author to write or type out a copy of a text and disperse it for free—I don’t think the internet (and you should correct me if I’m wrong on this point) has such areas that escape the material costs and demands of telecommunications companies et al (by that, I mean that the internet isn’t free of charge for readers, outside of libraries and such). So, okay, bring it on Dani—school me on the glories of the internet!”

Response (13/3/2014): “OKAY, fine, maybe I’ve been too long in discussions with the crazy people in DH who always blabber on about the revolutionary potentials of the hypertext &c. And you’re correct to note that there are (of course) material limitations to the digital project, not just the economic and preferential ones you’ve pointed to, but also literal material limitations (such as the inherently more transient nature of the digital project). These are limitations I’m willing to embrace—and that I certainly prefer over the limitations of more analog mediums—but I know that I can be a bit utopian in this regard. AND OKAY OKAY, there was an internet (a series of tubes, if I remember correctly) in 1999. ... But I would ABSOLUTELY say that the revolutionary potentials of digital projects had not been realized at the time.”

almost incessantly—recalls the epithet through words linked to it etymologically and sonically: “niggling,” “nigrescence,” “niggardly,” “enigma,” “neglect,” “negligible,” “niggling,” “negotiate,” “renege.” On one level, this poem is deliberately *not* exclusionary in its refusal to speak a word constantly associated with violence. But, it also points out how we talk about issues of censorship and exclusion, preferring political correctness above an actual abolition of oppression. Mullen says here that she’s responding to an event in which a staff member of the American government was pressured to resign after people misheard his use of the word “niggardly,” a word that Mullen correctly identifies as having no etymological relation to the epithet. “So,” she goes on to say, “this poem was a commentary on the power of language, even when it’s misheard or misapprehended” (Henning 60). But, interestingly, Mullen also notes that relating concepts sonically rather than etymologically is a distinctly poetic task, and thus the individuals who called for his resignation “were listening more like poets than lexicographers” (ibid). This suggests that poetry has the ability to conflate words, and thus to bastardize a language in both positive and negative ways.

The poem seems to suggest that ignoring or refusing the power of language to oppress contributes to that oppression. Consider, for example, the extreme awkwardness required in this poem to avoid saying certain words. One of these cases is the absurdity of the question, “How muddy is the Mississippi compared to the third-longest river of the darkest continent?” In this case, the speaker of the poem cannot say “Niger,” the river that is the third-largest in Africa, the continent in this poem that dare not speak its name. It is not a violent word that cannot be spoken, but rather words that name the places specifically for fear that speaking these names would make loud the silence of typically excluded readers and make manifest the structures of oppression that function globally. The poem suggests that there is nothing innate in the language

itself that is oppressive, but that language *is* often used as a force of oppression. This is something that Spahr also observes in Mullen’s work, arguing that “language and narration are not by themselves responsible for categorical oppression; rather, they at times walk hand in hand with the forces of oppression enabling and justifying these practices by providing a grammar of categorization and hierarchy” (*Everybody’s Autonomy* 90). Mullen constantly engages with this hierarchy, making manifest the processes of labeling certain languages illiterate, of refusing alternative literacies, of devaluing whole sets of beliefs, and of silencing the marginalized. In noting the violence of invisibility and silence, Mullen also draws attention to the paradox of her successes in speaking a language of *illiteracy* to an academy that relies on *literacy* to exist. In “Denigration,” she also asks: “If I disagree with your beliefs, do you chalk it up to my negligible powers of discrimination, supposing I’m just trifling and not worth considering?” Alongside a critique of literacies, this also draws attention to the ways that radical voices are silenced, an issue Henning connects with the word “renegade.” Their exchange on this is telling:

BH: I was thinking as I read this that I like being called a renegade ... the beats, the black arts, it was a plus to be a renegade.

HM: Yes, there’s power in that. Negation can be empowering in a certain sense, when you are free to define yourself against the dominant culture and not be crushed by it.

BH: But not when you think that your “self” has been erased before you know that there has been no erasing, that there can be no erasing. (60-1)

In this case, both Mullen and Henning seem to articulate precisely the tactics Hardt and Negri advocate. Self-abolition or a self in flux, a self that you can determine yourself, is impossible

unless we first make visible the invisible, make loud the silenced, and refuse ownership of identity as property. *Sleeping with the Dictionary* seems to do precisely this.

Spahr's work with authorial identity can be similarly illuminated by a turn to *Commonwealth*. Hardt and Negri provide us with a means of alterglobalization resistance and experiment that does not entirely dismiss identity from the beginning, a useful turn considering how often (mainly rights-based) activist groups oppose anarchism and poststructuralism on the grounds that it discounts the politics of these struggles. Following Hardt and Negri, postanarchism views identity politics as a means to an end rather than an end in itself (to be either reified or discounted depending on the perspective). They maintain that a "revolutionary politics has to start from identity but cannot end there" (326). Therefore, while they advocate the eventual abolition of identity as a marker of biopolitical production and overcoding, they concede that, as I quoted before, "[i]dentity is a weapon of the republic but one that can be turned against it" (326). One example of this, for Hardt and Negri, is the activism taken up by queer activists who embrace the term queer as polyglot and multiple in nature, thus implicitly critiquing identity politics through the very use of the term "queer" (335). I am tempted to argue here that Hardt and Negri's observations are especially apt to Spahr, whose life is marked by queerness via her polyamorous relationship. But, I am hesitant to make such a claim. First, because Spahr tends to avoid speaking of her personal life in relation to her work; she is by no means closeted, but she does tend to avoid making direct links between her romantic, sexual, and domestic life and her poetics, save the important example of the pseudo-memoir *The Transformation* (2007). Additionally, I worry that here I am also relying too heavily on an autobiographical reading, long held to be inappropriate in English studies (despite its always lingering somewhere in the background of literary analysis). I also wonder if this gesture is the

very kind of misbehaving Spahr advocates. Nonetheless, queerness is made manifest in her work. In *Response* we see it in the poem “thrashing seems crazy,” wherein the body with multiple personalities is made queer by virtue of its containing male and female identities simultaneously.³² What is most important about this example is that it functions somewhere between a reclamation of the means of producing subjectivity, on the one hand, and queerness on the other, insisting on a specificity that opposes the abstraction of identity.³³

While their step-by-step guide may read as an oversimplification, Hardt and Negri maintain that this abolition of identity is a grotesque violence; it is “monstrous, violent, and traumatic” (339). Similarly, while Spahr advocates the complication of identity and authorship, particularly by way of her refusal to “self-identify,” she also acknowledges in her work the trauma of abolishing identity. It is this trauma and violence that Lederer identifies when she discusses the violence of the form in *Response*, as when she argues that Spahr’s insertion of the

³² I do not wish to suggest here that the body with multiple personalities, or a body with any “disorder” labeled so by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) is inherently queer. Instead, I merely suggest that the body represented in *Response*, drawn from the lived experience of the woman who appeared on Oprah’s talk show, is one representation of queerness in the text. I do with some discomfort about the appropriation of mental illness, acknowledging that while it may be impossible to tell without violating, as my last post suggests, that some means of appropriation are more violating than others, and that using one person’s lived experience as a metaphor for queerness and activism without consent is one such move. I consider here the poetic metaphor only, and do not wish for my observations to be taken any further out of context.

³³ Comment by Jonathan Vandor (5/1/2014): “How does the multiple-personality disorder of the speaker (or speakers?) undermine the idea that a fluidity of the self or its authority would be a positive/desirable thing? Is it just the limiting example, is it indicating a yearning for the unitary self, or does it aim to show how the ‘diagnosis’ of MPD and its quotidian analogues would be helpful to understanding ourselves and others? And how does this connect to or differ from the Modernist interest in madness, in unusual psyches?”

Response (17/1/2014): “As a good pomo junkie, I believe that the construction of the subject is inevitable. BUT, as I’m working through in my work right now (it’s still in its baby stages), perhaps language gives us one way of doctoring those ways that we are constructed as subjects? Or, I’m too hopeful?”

Response by Jonathan Vandor (20/1/2014): “I don’t think you’re too hopeful at all. On the simplest level, isn’t the act of reading a re-writing of the self (albeit on a temporary basis), through identification or what-have-you? Or even though the questioning of one’s own politics? There’s a phrase nagging at the back of my head from an early nineteenth century piece that I read for my comps, which I can’t recall properly. But! George R. R. Martin got the gist of it recently: ‘A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies. The man who never reads lives only once.’”

generic (by way of this projects titular quotation, for example) “uses brackets violently” (143). Alternatively, she also argues that the book’s “white space functions invasively causing the page itself to become livid with terror” (ibid). However violent Lederer reads Spahr’s form, *Response* doesn’t make the process of abolishing identity violent so much as it uses it as an invitation to the fragmentary communal. The common is indeed monstrous insofar as it is amorphous, lacking firm outlines and therefore frighteningly unbounded. *Response* works to let this common stand in for the highly individualized traditional readings of violence and trauma. This is best demonstrated in the following passage:

a voice stutters in the background of our waking mind

[generic possessive pronoun] stutter is our stutter

or is it the way we define our difference?

stutter is nation (“responding: v” 1-4)

Here, the concept of “stutter” is central to this relationship to identity. In our fragmentation, born out of Hardt and Negri’s processes of reclamation, of making visible the invisible, and of refusing to possess our identities, we form community that is beyond the traditional boundaries of nation, of identity, and embrace a kind of queerness in our processes of identification. Spahr’s speaker asks the reader to question how we define difference, concluding that the stuttering differences of the multiple, never fully articulable in language, is what defines a reading community. The stutter is, as Dworkin’s “The Stutter of Form” tells us, the “murmur of [the] materials” (168) of language in which language “refers back to the material circumstances of its

own production” (167-8). For Dworkin, the stutter at once blocks communicative speech by “impeding the facile consumption of language” (182) *as well as* allowing for new and unique literary production free from the limitations of communicative articulation. In this way, the notion of stutter that Spahr puts forth is a common united by the freedom from articulation. We all stutter together, though we may do so in different ways. We are invited to misbehave in our readings. We all stutter as anarchist, as postanarchist, in our refusal to self-identify.

Readers’ Common and Experiential Communities

If my project has dwelled too long on the relationship between the individual and society, it’s because this divide is historically fraught in the study of poetry. And, certainly, this relationship is a recurring theme in all of Mullen’s work. Spahr, in her introduction to *Looking Up Harryette Mullen*, observes that historically, criticism has tended to argue that a poet, or a poem, has to value one over the other. That is, “[a]mong the many clichés that haunt a genre as old-school as poetry, there is the one that poetry is either about the community or the individual” (i). While it is clear from this chapter that Mullen problematizes issues of individuality and subjectivity, it is also not so easy to say that she has, thus, sided with the community. Rather, as Spahr contends, this dichotomy doesn’t help us much with Mullen. “It is not,” she argues, “that Mullen disowns ... concerns with individual subjectivity.... Rather she explores how community and individualism are in dialogue through modernism” (ibid). Even if, as Mullen herself argues, her “poetic language is more public and social, less private and hermetic than Stein’s” (Henning 13), the distance between these terms is blurred by her poems’ relationship with their readers. Mullen’s audience is envisioned as a community founded neither on individual subjectivity nor consensus on interpretation, but rather an experiential community of readers who are encouraged to alter the text as they read.

Demonstrating this requires, first, a look at how Mullen's authorship, particularly in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, is disrupted in order to make room for the multiple readings of an audience the text approaches as *common*. In her look at the collection through the lens of cognitive theory, Luck argues that the authorship therein is less an act of Romantic authority and more a process of editing an inner voice. This process disrupts traditional authorship because the "act of editing the inner voice, whether for verbal or written communication, is ... both passive and active and constituted by forces inside and outside of the subject herself" (361). As a result, Mullen does not work towards a uniqueness, what Luck's cognitive theory recognizes as a form of "emergence," but rather concedes that "emergence is an impossible task, and perhaps beside the point" (362). Instead the prose poems in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* draw from "multiple influences of the language system, the poet's passive submission to the push of her body and unconscious mind, and her active tweaking and shaping, or simple 'recording,' of the 'dictums' of these influences" (379-80), an act that, as the collection's title suggests, is both linguistic and corporeal.

What this means is that we as readers are invited to understand the author more as editor and less as Author who, as Barthes observed, limits our engagement to the text by encouraging readers to interpret and thus "decipher" it (*Image – Music* 147). Because she is an editor of an inner voice (or, to be more accurate, a multiplicity of inner voices), we are able to understand Mullen's decisions as somewhat arbitrary, and this causes us to reflect on our own reading and editing decisions, which are arbitrary too, the text reminds us. For Andy Weaver, it is this "emphasis on the arbitrary nature of the reader's interpretive decisions" that essentially "forces the reader into an awareness of the arbitrary nature of her/his decision-making process" (*Indeterminacy* 109). For Mullen, this understanding of writing and reading as editing is a way of

approaching the common of her readership as such. Instead of opposing Saussure, as we saw in Mac Low, Mullen repurposes him, arguing that though “the relation of the signifier and signified is arbitrary, ... our habitual usage builds all sorts of associations between them” (82). The communities produced by this “habitual usage” demonstrate that “[l]anguage isn’t the property of any one person or group. It belongs to everyone who uses it” (82), and need not form oppressive or exclusive communities.

In our variant readings of *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, we form experiential communities rather than interpretive communities. While Mullen often talks in interviews about this element of her work, it is rarely taken up in the criticism, and when included it’s often left underdiscussed, as in Emily P. Beall’s “‘As reading as if’: Harryette Mullen’s ‘cognitive similes,’” which approaches the experiential community in Mullen by way of critiquing Cognitive (or Conceptual) Metaphor theory and its oversimplification of reader interpretation. Beall argues that the Cognitive Metaphor model (represented in this article by Peter Stockwell’s *Cognitive Poetics*) does not and cannot account for the multiphasic and active engagement of open readers. That is,

while he [Stockwell] specifies that a reader must intervene and interpret to a greater degree in open text, he does not consider the possibility that this radical openness could be such that the intervention and interpretation is potentially endless—and in fact will end only when a reader chooses to end her reading under constraints of time and not due to constraints of completion. (136-7)

Weaver sees these potential inexhaustive/inexhaustible readings as inherently communal in that they promote active readership and readerly engagement well above interpretation and exegesis, allowing for disagreement that is necessarily political. He writes that “[t]hese moments of

irreconcilable dissensus suggest a political philosophy behind Mullen's text (a text that uncharitable readers might disregard as nonsensical and thus apolitical in its refusal to offer an easily consumable set of ideas)" (108). Readers are united in their experience of the poem, and in affective relationship with the text (an assemblage of readers and texts). Readers form affective communities based on the experience of reading the text largely because exegetical or exhaustive interpretive communities are rendered impossible by the multiple potential meanings.

He observes too that this greater freedom afforded to the reader allows him or her "to continue the process of self-determination after s/he has finished reading the text" (123), thus encouraging both the individual and the common at once. As Weaver observes, "[a]t one and the same time, the text acknowledges the individual's inclusion in the group, but also shows that there is an essential individual identity that remains outside the group's influences. This idea impacts not only the individual subjectivity, but the group as well" (136). Both inclusion and exclusion of the reader occurs on the level of language that, in its openness, functions, Frost adds, "like the text of 'bliss' described by Roland Barthes as evoking in the reader a crisis of language," in that "these citations provoke both pleasure and discomfort" (468). While both Weaver and Frost are referring to *Muse & Drudge* here, *Sleeping with the Dictionary* functions in a similar manner.

Both collections serve as excellent pedagogical tools in their production of a readers' common, an element of which Mullen is well aware.³⁴ In an interview with Frost, she explains

³⁴ I should add that Mullen is also concerned, in *Muse & Drudge* especially, with her literal "audience"—the people who attend her poetry readings. Noticing that her physical audience changed from predominantly black and nonacademic, to predominantly white and academic, she wanted to create a work that would speak to a community that included them all. "I think of myself and my writing as being marginal to all the different communities that have contributed to the poetic idiom of my work," she says, "but at the same time it is important to me that I work in the interstices, where I occupy the gap that separates one from the other; or where there might be overlapping boundaries, I work in that space of overlap or intersection" (Henning 22). She explicitly states that she wants *Muse & Drudge* "to bring the various readers of my work together" ("Solo Mysterioso" 664).

that “*Muse & Drudge* was written to create an audience. It was very deliberate. And when you talk about your class having a collective experience, I think that’s great—that is exactly what I was hoping for” (416). Additionally, she talks throughout the interview about the importance of “different meanings in the multivalent references,” where the processes of reading and writing aren’t so distinct. “This is about *me* reading too,” she maintains, “getting what I get and passing it on” (407). Echoing Duncan’s conception of poetry as the commons, Mullen knows that her book, while emblazoned with her name, is not hers. She tells Frost,

I think that it’s mine. And I realize that I have to share it. . . . This whole book is about being possessed by others. It is very much made up of the voices themselves—words of others that I’ve read, heard, or overheard. . . . If it is me, it’s just generic. . . . The individual and the collective merge, as in the blues. (408)

While she too is referring to *Muse & Drudge*, we see the collective merge in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*; in fact, I would argue that Mullen’s return to the prose poem—and move away from the quatrains of *Muse & Drudge*—makes the collection experiential in a more effective way.

For one thing, in the prose poem, the shape and size shift with the materiality of the poem, whether viewed in print or digitally, and on the specific printed edition; additionally, a shift in materiality would also alter the line breaks, revealing them to be arbitrary, at the mercy of the margin only. The prose poems in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* are also organized paratactically so the sentences don’t necessarily require a linearity or a causality to their reading; despite being prose, these are not narratives. So when two sentences are juxtaposed, as in the lines “The agency tapping my telephone heard my pen drop. Now I’m walking out of pink ink” in “Natural Anguish” (52), the seeming dichotomy of an “agency” and an “I” is different depending on how we read the sentences’ relation to each other. The “agency” as government

and surveillance is aligned with “pink ink” which the speaker leaves behind, her “pen drop” a refusal to write on their terms. And yet, the “agency” is so named to recall personal agency; individual autonomy is also necessarily communal and connected (via telephone and their extreme attentiveness). The “pink ink” recalls Hélène Cixous’s “white ink” that ends “The Laugh of the Medusa” as if to say that a new *écriture féminine* (both infantilized through the internal rhyme and feminized through the colour pink) needs to be *coloured*, literally. It’s this view of writing that the speaker leaves behind.³⁵ The radically different content of the sentences (which, as sentences and not lines of verse, are expected to follow causally) make us suspect of even the connection between the first-person pronouns. A few lines before this the poem is situated on a theme of language when Mullen writes “On the way back when I saw red I thought ouch. Soon when I think colored someone bleeds.” So, the “pink ink” is also diluted blood drawn from the violence of language (“ouch” and “colored”), and especially the racial and colonial oppression language can enforce. And “pink ink” is also a lightening of blood, a move to make it slightly less “colored.” And, if we are refusing linearity and causality here, can we not read this “On the way back” as a suggestion that the speaker is returning to the place she was “walking out of,” although they appear in reverse order in the poem? I would argue that the phrasing of both demands it. And, my readings can go on...

Much like the materiality of the page, the experiential communities formed in reading these poems are also determined by space, as in Frost’s classroom that she discusses with Mullen in the interview quoted above. Text also invites corporeal engagement to form these experiential

³⁵ Robbins provides the following interpretation of these sentences: “Mullen’s very invocation of the term ‘agency’ [in “Natural Anguish”] to allude to cultural practices of surveillance suggests the disadvantages faced by the objects of this surveillance, for the operatives of dominant culture’s systems of control in fact tune in to Mullen’s silence and her *loss* of agency, both points figured in her dropping of her pen, playing on the common ‘pin-dropping’ metaphor for total silence” (362).

communities which are tied into the very poems themselves as they encourage a reader's intervention. This is involved in how we connect in our readings, whether in a classroom, through this thesis, or even in conversation well after the physical book has left our hands. But, it's also involved in how we physically adjust the poems themselves. So, Weaver suggests that the author as "incomplete" and "non-authoritative" thus "allows the reader to take a more active role, a role that could not only include writing additional verses, but also rearranging the verses of the text" (106). I too have rearranged even the sentences within the poem. And Mullen knows that once she realizes she has to "share it," she relinquishes domination over readers, who can then intervene in whatever way they see fit. So, when Frost asks her: "Do you like the idea of someone just opening it and starting anywhere?" (413), she avoids responding to that question directly. After all, the order of the poems is another process of editing, the arbitrariness of which is amplified in *Sleeping with the Dictionary's* alphabetizing. And, of course, what she "likes," she knows, has no place in the reading of her poems.

Spahr's work has also seen a longstanding interest in the notion of the common and in connectivity or collectivity. This interest in the common is necessarily linked to both notions of the self, as I have already indicated, and also in issues of language and expression, and is clearly informed by her engagement with the major currents of literary theory and criticism. Marjorie Perloff uses Spahr's *Everybody's Autonomy* as an example of a text that champions the intersections between the theory that has become so pervasive in the English department and creative poetry (especially in the example of LANGUAGE poetry), citing the text as one of "a number of scholarly books ... already appeared on feminist language poetics and other facets of the 'new poetics'" ("Avant-Garde Tradition" 129). And yet, true to Perloff's propositions in *Unoriginal Genius*, her article upholds a kind of authorship that Spahr clearly works against,

asserting throughout that an influx of theoretical issues into poetry does not negate issues of individual talent and authorial genius. Spahr's own characterization of LANGUAGE poetry in "The 90s" is rather different. She ignores issues of individual talent and authorial genius in favour of a conception of experimental writing founded on "a return to the idea of a literary commons" (179). The article sees Spahr asserting confidently an anarcho-communist approach to literary criticism: "No one owns literature" (180). Despite the many connections between Spahr and Perloff in the literary community, their approaches to authorship and the literary commons are diametrically opposed.

In "A, B, C," Spahr similarly posits a theory of literary criticism that is vastly more concerned with connections and commons than it is with an individual author or oeuvre. "What is here," she writes, "is not a genealogy, but a rethinking of reading and the connection between texts. These are connections of against" (283). The very process of reading against that Spahr develops in this essay, and which I have discussed in detail already, disrupts notions of the authority of the author, preferring instead misreadings and connections. Mayer, in "Aggregators," similarly emphasizes the role of connection and common in Spahr's work, noting that this, too, is something she's adapted from Stein.³⁶ Mayer sees enacted in Spahr's poetry an

³⁶ Comment by Andy Weaver (2/2/2014): "To play devil's advocate in relation to Stein and reader autonomy: I agree that there is a large amount of interpretive freedom in a Stein text, and this certainly leads to more interpretive freedom than with the huge majority of texts—but, when I read Stein, I am always constantly aware that Stein has created this document. Her virtuosity never lets me forget her own hand in creating the text and allowing me, as a reader, this freedom. Is that a problem when arguing that Stein allows for reader autonomy, as you and Spahr assert?"

Response (4/2/2014): "This is something I've been wondering about Stein, especially as she's become this kind of larger-than-life figure. I agree that Stein's looming presence (over everything in this project, it seems—perhaps it's because I visited her grave in Paris? did she follow me back?) makes reader autonomy quite complicated. And I also think that her work directly invites the reader to decode and interpret, which complicates it further. But I still think she made a crack in the wall that keeps readers out of the text, and I think that's what Spahr picks up from her most."

Response by Andy Weaver (5/2/2014): "I think the way you describe Stein's stance (as starting to break down the

understanding of the “relation of bodies and languages as systems of connection,” demonstrated best in Spahr’s “use of the Steinian principle of repetition to provide a non- or anti-narrative thread or trace. Often, the repeated word or phrase is about the nature of language, form, and narrative itself” (44). Spahr most clearly articulates this politics and poetics of common in *Everybody’s Autonomy*, a revision of her doctoral thesis. In the book she presents connectivity as a “politicized model of reading” (53), which is based on and in the common, and which privileges the reader and his/her connections to the text well above any writer’s authority. While her work in this text focuses on formally experimental poetry, she posits that the very act of “reading is more communal than individual—more resistant than complicit—than one finds in most reader response theory” (161). Central to this is her theory that the meaning of a text is produced, especially in the case of the formally experimental text, through an “abandoning of authorial privilege” (53) on the one hand, and the reader producing meaning on the other. That is, she argues that “meaning is tied to community and is necessarily collective. The creative economy here emphasizes talking through reuse and recombination” (103). The approach runs counter to Perloff’s adherence, throughout her academic work, on lineage, tradition, and individual talent, and instead proposes a radically egalitarian mode of criticism.

Importantly, *Everybody’s Autonomy* is an explicitly anarchic text, proposing an anarcho-communist approach to reading that is not unlike the postanarchism that I propose in this project. She presents it, in the text’s introduction, as a mode of “anarchic reading” (13), and later develops this concept into an “anarchic democracy” (49). Her concept of communal autonomy is, for her, a kind of “anarchic autonomy” which stands in contrast to the “liberal humanism” that

wall for the reader) is absolutely accurate. I like that discussion more than the discussion of Stein as having completely succeeded in breaking down that wall. Along those lines, she seems in a position similar to Pound, in that both started the respective revolutions that eventually outstripped them.”

traditional conceptions of author and reader uphold (154). The text is also particularly concerned with the practical and activist elements of this understanding of readership, constantly returning to how these particular authors (Stein, Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian, Mullen, and Hak Kyung Cha) function in the classroom. It is this aspect of the text that reviewer Logan Esdale finds most interesting, writing that the texts Spahr discusses “are inclusive . . . involving readers in the production of meaning; these texts encourage collective reading, as in a classroom, so that the experience of reading them is a shared one” (93). Esdale’s review, however, is one of the more generous ones.

Everybody’s Autonomy, published in 2001, met with a good deal of resistance. A number of reviews in journals at the time of the book’s release criticized her as well-meaning perhaps, but idealistic and, ultimately, much more conventional than Spahr would have her readers believe. First and foremost, reviewers such as Jennifer Ashton viewed the text as not very controversial. Ashton writes that “Spahr imagines herself to be making a controversial and corrective argument, claiming that deconstruction failed to recognize the degree to which reading—no matter how much we invest it with the power of ‘authorship’—is itself a learned and regulated act” (388). Jonathan Monroe’s review is more scathing, characterizing Spahr’s work as not only outdated but delusional. He writes:

If it can be claimed, as Spahr writes, that in some sense “reader autonomy . . . dominates avant-garde literature of the late twentieth century” (as it also dominated that century’s earlier decades?), it has nevertheless been convincingly argued—by critics and theorists as diverse as Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser, Hans Robert Jauss, Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson, and Pierre Bourdieu—that the idea of “reader autonomy” (as also the supposed autonomy of writers) is an

ideological delusion in need of critique and demystification. (754)

Monroe later in his review argues that *Everybody's Autonomy* actually runs counter to its own politics in that it “displays ambivalence toward group formations and identifications— aesthetically, socially, politically—and a strong sense of conflicted insularity,” and that “Spahr tends too easily to equate difficult or innovative formal structures with the capacity for complexity and richness of response, as well as cultural and political consequentiality” (759).

And, Ashton eventually argues that the text opposes the very process of reading in general:

But of course, as soon as the difference between readers becomes a difference between their experiences rather than a difference between their interpretations of the text (why they can never form an *interpretive* community) we have to say that what Spahr wants readers to resist is not the *hegemony* of reading but *reading itself*. (388, *emph.* Ashton's)

I would like to end this chapter by addressing these concerns—that the text is not controversial, that it is delusional, that it opposes group formation, and that it opposes reading in general—by looking to three specific examples from *Response* that demonstrate that Spahr's poetics, despite these reviewers concerns, are effective postanarchist strategies for reading as activist.

The first example I would like to look at is the line “the social always holds us back” (10), which would seem, at first, to counteract Spahr's interest in connection, and in social commonality. Instead, the line carries with it dual meanings, another paradox in *Response*: that we fear social communion, on the one hand; that we are held back by social institutions that seek to govern individuality on the other. Contrary to Monroe's review, Spahr does not ignore the work of writers like Adorno and Althusser who work to demystify the cultural influences on an individual's supposed autonomy. Instead, she understands these cultural influences as a jumping-

off-point, making the argument that the construction of the self does not mean that we do not, in turn, exert relative autonomy over our lives and the choices that we make. If “the social holds us back,” it does not stop us entirely; connective reading and a view of literature as the common is one way of approaching autonomy. Monroe, in guarded poststructuralist fashion, sees the argument that there is no complete autonomy and reads “there is no autonomy.” Reader autonomy is not a delusion any more than the social itself is.

Later in “responding,” Spahr writes, as I have quoted previously, “stutter is nation” (“responding: V” 4), another quotation that seems to directly address Monroe’s concerns. In “stutter is nation,” and in other similar phrasings throughout the collection, she does not oppose group formation, but rather promotes affiliative and porous groupings rather than filiative and clearly-defined borders. Filiation and border are the means by which, as many of the writers Monroe lists argue, the individual is governed by social institutions; they are the very weapons of ideological state apparatus. Formal experimentation, by way of stutter, is a means of breaking down generic conventions and traditional boundaries. If *Everybody’s Autonomy* tends to prioritize the formally experimental text, it is because these texts most clearly oppose the filiations and boundaries that are death to true commonality.

Finally, I would like to add one more example from *Response*, also from “responding,” when Spahr envisions “[a reader culture” without a close to the square bracket, arguing that “[generic plural pronoun] prefer both” (“responding: I” 11-12). By asserting that “[generic plural pronoun] prefer both,” Spahr not only emphasizes plurality and commonality, but also proposes a valuation of reading as experience rather than interpretation, an anti-exegesis, which is, to grant their points, not entirely new, as my project has demonstrated, but is still clearly being treated as a radicalism that opposes the very process of reading a poem. Preferring both is an exercise in

embracing alternative rather than binarism or dualism; it is supported by the various manifestations of paradox that I have discussed throughout. At the heart of tradition (and individual talent) is a hegemony of reading founded on exegesis, hermeneutics, and semiotics. [a reader culture does not form interpretive communities, but rather experiential communities. It embraces *readings* rather than just reading; it prefers both.

Everybody's Autonomy suggests, above all, that preferring both—itsself a tactic of reading *against*—is the contradiction that stands at the centre of any effective community of readers. If a text is to encourage a reader's common at all it must leave itself open to the radical potentials of dissensus, of the disagreement inherent in the multiple potentials of the reading process. This chapter has demonstrated that both Mullen and Spahr have made this a primary concern in the texts that I have focused on but also, I hope to have shown, in their entire careers as poets and theorists of literature. While *Response* and *Sleeping with the Dictionary* are quite different collections on first read, this study has suggested that at the core of both books is a desire to connect with the poet's readers on as direct a level as possible by allowing the readers to realize their own autonomy through the sheer multiplicity of potentials available to them. The critical backlash that *Everybody's Autonomy* received should not serve to discredit this desire for a reader's common, but should instead foreground how radical this conception of a readership is even now. Its suggestions are anarchist, are postanarchist, and they demand that we relinquish our critical authority as much as these poets worked to relinquish their creative authority over the text. It suggests, too, that we relinquish our identities as individual readers, instead approaching the "freedom" that Hardt and Negri insist is central to the common. Though their poetics may differ, as I have shown, their tactics remain the same. Both appropriate voices that would seek to silence them. Both collapse the binaries that serve to reduce the autonomy of reader and writer.

Both look to ephemerality and openness to counteract the dangerous tendencies of our world to overcode. Both crack open language, allowing the reader to enter in those fissures. And both insist that this process is always only ever incomplete: there is no completely authorless poem, no completely infinite potential, no completely exhaustive reading, no completely removed subjectivity. But neither lament this incompleteness. Instead, it is in the way neither poet looks to hide these incomplete processes that these texts function best as the locations for postanarchist reading-as-activism, where the reader finds himself or herself confronted with these fissures and is asked to fill them on his or her own, with his or her self.

Chapter Four: Sleeping in the Library: Susan Howe and Erin Mouré

Beginning work on Susan Howe is a daunting task because she has garnered so much critical attention. My own scholarship on Howe focuses on one of her most popular works, *A Bibliography of the King's Book, or, Eikon Basilike* (1989), a text that has frequently been the subject of critical scholarship. For the most part, the scholarship on *Eikon Basilike* has stressed the visual, the historical, and the violent, as well as the ways that these terms intersect in the text. The book works through the dubious authorship of *The Eikon Basilike, The Pourtraicture of His Sacred Majestie in his Solitude and Sufferings* (1649) (a book simultaneously attributed to Charles I and John Gauden, but probably produced by an amalgam of unidentified and unidentifiable authors), as well as Edward Almack's *A Bibliography of the King's Book; or, Eikon Basilike* (1896),¹ which tries in vain to ascertain clear authorship by Charles I. Located on a highly complex and contested site of authorship, Howe's text negotiates sites of historical documentation, historical violence (by way of Charles I's execution), and the complex relationship between external "truth" and the visual markers of print. My work will not ignore these issues; indeed, they will surface throughout this chapter. But, I do want to point to the fact that the scholarship on *Eikon Basilike*, and on Howe more generally, has tended to overlook some important political and poetic issues in favour of repeatedly discussing these concerns.

While I will offer a thorough analysis of the literature surrounding *Eikon Basilike*, I would first like to demonstrate this critical oversight by way of the example of Mandy Bloomfield's 2009 article, "'Aftershock of Iconoclasm': Ambivalence of the Visual Page in Susan Howe's *Eikon Basilike*," where it is clearly evident. In this essay, published nearly twenty

¹ To avoid confusion among these three texts, all references hereafter of *Eikon Basilike* refer specifically to Howe's text. Any reference to the 1649 text will be signalled by the definite article, *The Eikon Basilike*. Any reference to Almack's bibliography will be referred to as such.

years after Howe's *Eikon* was first printed, Bloomfield crafts a beautiful analysis of the visual disruptions of print in the text, linking this visual prosody to issues of historical accuracy, colonial violence, and the Puritan use of iconoclasm. This culminates in an astute analysis of *Eikon*'s epigraphic poem that, in the Paradigm Press edition (1989), appears on an unnumbered page before the falsified frontispiece. In the text's later inclusion in Howe's collection *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (1993), this epigraphic poem appears on page fifty-one², with the

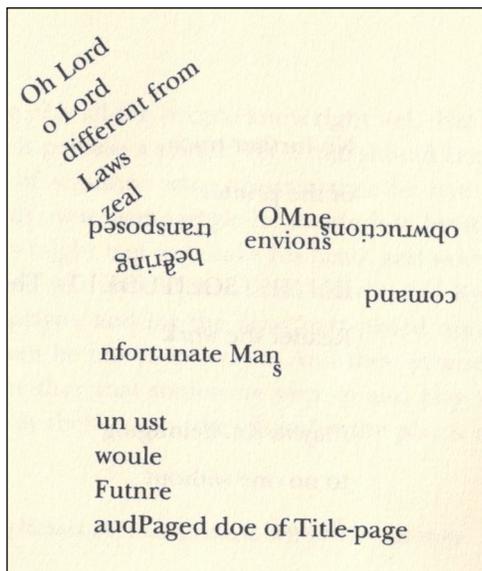


Figure 12
Susan Howe. From *Eikon Basilike. The Nonconformist's Memorial* (51).

frontispiece removed. The epigraphic poem initiates the reader into the visual disruptions that permeate the series as a whole; it begins with an askew, nearly toppling-over, “Oh Lord / o Lord” and continues to upturn and erase letters and words throughout. Bloomfield notes that a number of the words on the page would read as complete or nearly complete save for one or two tiny adjustments: “Omne” becomes “O mine” with the addition of the letter “i”; “envions” becomes “envious” when the “n” is flipped over into a “u”; “nnfortunate”³ offers the same

² Because the pages of the original edition of *Eikon Basilike* are not numbered, all numerical designations from the long poem are references to the version of the poem in *The Nonconformist's Memorial*. Any differentiation between editions will be noted via footnote.

Additionally, the entirety of the poem will be referred to as a series throughout, and when such a reference appears it designates the poem itself in both its editions. Individual pages or groups of pages are hereafter referred to as “poems” within the larger “series” of *Eikon Basilike* in its own book-length publication as well as its appearance in *The Nonconformist's Memorial*.

³ In the 1989 edition, the word Bloomfield quotes (“nnfortunate”) appears with the two “n”s at its start. When the poem is revised for inclusion in *The Nonconformist's Memorial*, however, the first “n” is dropped, leaving the word as “nfortunate,” which loses the first “n”/“u” completely rather than simply missing it. The fact that Bloomfield fails to note this editorial choice demonstrates even further her interest in the generalities of Howe's wordplay rather than the singular implications.

potential fix. While she is both attentive and interested in making observations about Howe's visual play, it is clear that Bloomfield overlooks one crucial element of these manipulations: the elided letters are most often "i" and "u," implicitly destabilizing identity and subjectivity alongside the print grid.⁴

I do not mean to suggest here that subjectivity and identity in Howe's work have been completely critically ignored; I note only that critics have tended to elide these issues in favour of more provocative academic trends that look at material conditions, textual violence, and iconoclasm. As such, I begin my study of Howe by arguing that *Eikon Basilike*, a text that begins with the extremely personal and anecdotal description of Howe's son purchasing Almack's text at a library sale, actively resists the "biography that trivializes" (523), as Perloff observes in a 1989 article. Howe instead inserts the personal (rather than the biographical) into larger and more traditionally impersonal structures, like history, language, and government. But she also persistently undermines the "personal" as a closed-off entity. As a result, the text continues a line of ego-disruption that each poet in my project has followed in his or her own way.

Kathleen Crown's "'This Unstable I-witnessing': Susan Howe's Lyric Iconoclasm and the Articulating Ghost," published in 1998, is one such article that approaches the issues of authorship and subjectivity before Perloff seemed to have her last word on the subject. Crown's study interrogates the ways in which Howe sees her poems, even those unified in a numberless and narrativeless seriality such as *Eikon Basilike*, as singularities or parts of a multiplicitous whole (485). Crown characterizes Howe's serial project as *anti-telos* (486) in a manner not

⁴ Comment by Andy Weaver (19/3/14): "I wonder if it's worth drawing a connection between the displaced 'u' and 'I' in Howe's work and the eliding of 'u are' in the title of Mullen's *S*PeRM**K*T*? Or is that too tangential?"

Response (26/3/14): "Okay, don't kick me out of the program for this, but I definitely never realized that the letters missing in *S*PeRM**K*T* are 'u are.' It's worth noting in a footnote though, for sure!"

unlike my earlier descriptions of Duncan's *Passages* series. For Crown, the complicated authorship of the text demands relocation rather than rejection of authorial agency (489), resurrecting rather than denigrating the radical potentials of the lyric "I" as eye-witness (484). This should recall my discussion of Levertov too, who emphasized the role of witnessing throughout her work. But, Levertov was never concerned with resurrecting the witnessing-"I" because it had not, by then, experienced such a denigration. Crown proposes a radical rethinking of authorship in Howe: a kind of "ecstatic" (488) challenge to a linear view of history and the unity of the lyric subject. My project takes up Crown's reading of an authorship in *Eikon Basilike* that hears "voices" (490), a spectral noise that echoes the violence and error of the general scholarship, but one that also acknowledges "language's agency exceeds one's control" (493). Howe's authorship is thus a speaking subject that is formed *by* these voices, by the polyvocality of disparate voices coming together.

I also want to acknowledge Nicky Marsh's article, which appears around the same time as Crown's, that warns against reading Howe's work as purely radical and anti-author. While Marsh is more concerned with Howe's work before *Eikon*, her point that Howe's eventual mainstream success affords her a greater opportunity for authorial control (124) is crucial. While Marsh notes Howe's movement between the personal and the historical leaves readers "scrambling" for meaning (125), she also insists that

reading the deconstructed self in the experimental text solely as a reaction to the mainstream and expressive poetic constructs a dichotomy from which we are unable to contextualize the specific historical and social impetus behind experimental writing. (126)

It's not enough to say, then, that Howe works against expression. Instead, Marsh argues that "Howe's acceptance of alterity ... seems founded upon her ability to write a language that can transcend the limitation of a single subject position" (134). At times, however, her desire to relinquish her *self* in literature leaves her blind to issues of privilege, as in what Marsh describes as Howe's problematic discussion of captivity narratives (135). To avoid the pitfalls Marsh discusses, my work instead follows Gerald L. Bruns, who often discusses issues of anarchism in poetry, and who is particularly concerned with the ways that Howe's work (mainly in her work after *Eikon*) entails a process of "self-formation through the appropriation of the writing (and therefore the subjectivity) of others" (28). Bruns characterizes Howe's work as multiplicitous authorship, an "assemblage of found texts" (42). This process, which he terms "intersubjectivity" to distinguish it from the modernist practice of "intertextuality" (43), is radically postanarchic.

Taking up the seemingly ignored prods of these critics, my work on Howe is interested primarily in those moments of awkward complication when the text directly confronts the issues of unilaterality and genius that Perloff retains even as she condemns. In the pages that follow, I will study ecstasy and its relationship to static, to the virtual illegibility of much of *Eikon Basilike*; I will politicize this polyvocality via the Derridean concept of hauntology, trying to differentiate between the many spectral noises at play; I will interrogate Howe's physical and intellectual relationship with her readers, whose subjectivity she quite literally seeks to destabilize; and, I will situate Howe's work in terms of a literary canon, at once problematizing her alignment with the genre of LANGUAGE poetry, and proposing instead her inclusion as a kind of concrete poet concerned with textual embodiment. In the end, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which reading Howe's now canonical text through the lens of postanarchism can

reinvigorate her work from the categorization and oversimplification that *Eikon Basilike* has suffered under the detached and often inattentive academic gaze.

Issues of subjectivity, textual embodiment, and illegibility synergistically also extend through and are central to my discussion of the other text I will focus on in this chapter, acclaimed Canadian poet Erin Mouré's *Pillage Laud*.⁵ Like *Eikon Basilike*, *Pillage Laud* seems to flaunt its experimental and unique authorial practices, and thus the issue of authorship and subjectivity has not gone unnoticed in the minimal scholarship surrounding the book. For example, Andy Weaver's discussion of the text in his doctoral thesis takes as its starting point the fact that the computer-generated authorship of the book might lead some judgmental readers to discredit its authorship, or the text as a whole. Weaver notes that the apparent contradiction of the title of *Pillage Laud* addresses this concern immediately, rendering the text "a stolen object worthy of honour or thanks" (266). He argues that alongside the text's "constant tension between sense and nonsense" (268), there is a consistent deferral of authorship proper. This is clearly evident, Weaver observes, in the paratextual notes in the 1999 printing that tell us "the text selects" from the computer-generated output, rather than the author doing her own selecting (273). This is, Weaver adds, and I must concede, a bit of a misnomer—the text itself has not, of course, done anything agential in its selection. Instead, Mouré's collaborative authorship with the computer indicates that "we are passive inheritors of language, and . . . our subjectivity is formed and maintained not only through language, but by language" (283). But, where he may see some radical formal experimentation in Mouré's book of computer-generated love poems, Weaver is quick to argue that while Mouré may boast some philosophical similarities to LANGUAGE poetry (287), she upholds "the normalization of capitalist thinking in language" (290) by using

⁵ All references to *Pillage Laud* signaled by page numbers refer to the 2011 BookThug reprint. I will explicitly note where this edition differs with the 1999 original Moveable Type printing.

typical or traditional grammar. By rejecting Silliman's New Sentence, Mouré appropriates the image and aesthetics of LANGUAGE writing, but does so—for Weaver—both uncritically and apolitically, essentially downplaying the content of the text (309). I will return later to Weaver's criticisms of Mouré's politics in *Pillage Laud*. At this moment, I would like to instead point out that the heart of Weaver's criticism is in the choices made by the author in relation to the indeterminate output of the MacProse program.

Instead of seeing it as uncritical, I would like to reposition Mouré's authorship in this text as one of collaboration with an external force (the computer, MacProse, technology in general). In this sense, *Pillage Laud* is produced by cyborg authorship, which is, I would like to argue, inherently social. Social authorship is the primary concern of Rachel Blau DuPlessis in her recent essay "Agency, social authorship, and the political aura of contemporary poetry." In this essay, DuPlessis argues that our contemporary discussions of authorship must move beyond the poststructural insistence on the death of the Author, searching instead for ways of theorizing authorship that recognizes the impossibility of individual expression but still ascribes a kind of agential role to the producer of a text. The argument is clearly postanarchist, though DuPlessis never names it as such. "Authorship is neither dead nor singular," she argues, "neither all discursive mediumship nor all individual expression. Authorship occurs in being possessed, not mystically, not sublimely, but precisely by sociality as a part of a work's dissemination and reception [and] its production" (987). This possession by the social, the inclusion of the author in social assemblage, is neither an uncritical adoption of Foucauldian discursivity nor a utopian view of collaboration. Instead, DuPlessis presents a theory of authorship that revives Foucault's author-function from the dust-coverage of old poststructural philosophy. She writes that

Far from denying agency, far from barring the possibility of social authorship in the production of literary texts, Foucault's somewhat quaint assumption of author-disappearance-and-death opens the space for a proposal of post-personal authorship and a discussion of the rhetorical modes that such authorship might choose to deploy. (988)

Moving beyond Foucault then, DuPlessis wants to open up a space for the author as agential within an assemblage of subjectivity (990), a place where we as readers and critics can envision a "non-expressivist, not explicitly personal, goal for writing" (989). In this realm of social authorship, the author is not an *a priori* figure, not "the biographical person walking around in the world," but rather a figure produced by the text itself and by "what that person 'announces' of her formal, ideological and discursive agency at the writing table" (990-1). The poem is thus a "complex matrix" (992) where social authorship is a representation of plurality *as* and not *of* the enunciation (993). Acknowledging the utopian, communistic dangers of suggesting the pure radical possibilities of social authorship, DuPlessis adds at the end of this essay that, of course, "[n]o form has any intrinsic content, any intrinsic politics" (997), and that, therefore, social authorship is only radical because of the extant Author-god hegemony.

As if in support of DuPlessis's arguments that we cannot disown or dismiss the author so wholly, *Pillage Laud* is littered with examples of the text attempting to refuse the subject position of the author, only to have it prove itself either unable or unwilling to come apart completely. Page thirty-one states, "My subject wouldn't split." And later "The writer orbits me. My line (article) has sighed" (52). Unlike other, perhaps more radical, disruptions of authorship (as in Cage or Mac Low, for example), Mouré's work in *Pillage Laud* does not just admit the impossibility of the completely unegoic text, it admits this impossibility as a starting point for a

more effective and more nuanced study of authorship and subjectivity. The writing “I” of the text, the line (article), is not rejected, it “sigh[s],” opening itself to external forces, taking in the social, and embracing the extralinguistic possibilities for communication. Her conception of authorship here is more in line with Black Mountain than LANGUAGE poetics insofar as she envisions authorship as an entrance into a field of interconnectivity with other texts rather than an individualized rethinking of semantics. Mouré’s authorship constitutes a radical rethinking of subjectivity, and her destabilized but still necessarily present voice creeps into the computer’s output, producing an “Erín Moure”⁶ by virtue of its enunciations. The speaker, or more truthfully the text itself, boasts: “my field had owned me” (24). The speaker of this collection is an assemblage, a cyborg authorship that is produced by a rhizomatic field that encapsulates the computer and its output, the human Mouré, and the resultant text.

The authorship of *Pillage Laud* is also social by virtue of Mouré’s many different writing personas, made manifest in her various and varied uses of differing names.⁷ This is a concern many critics have addressed in their scholarship on her. For example, in Isabel A. Moore’s article on “Lyric Fever,” she writes that Mouré’s use of many pseudonyms⁸ is a direct challenge to the

⁶ Mouré’s name appears on the cover of the 1999 Moveable Type edition of *Pillage Laud* as “Erin Mouré” in quotation marks, retaining the usual spelling of her name but adding the distancing quotation marks that signal the performativity of the authorial persona. The 2011 BookThug reprint reproduces the quotation marks of the original author name but shifts the accent to the “i” in “Erín Moure.”

⁷ The “Erín Moure” is not the only persona Mouré develops to author her texts. Her name appears often without any accent (perhaps typographical error, perhaps heteronymic, perhaps both). Her translations (or transliterations, as she terms them, frequently appear attributed to a pseudonym. *Sheep’s Vigil by a Fervent Person* is published under Eirin Moure, and others are attributed to Elisa Sampedrin or Calgarii Mourii. Under Elisa Sampedrin, Mouré also collects the poems for Lisa Robertson’s *Magenta Soul Whip* (2010).

⁸ Comment by Andy Weaver (3/6/14): “I like the section where you work through Mouré’s use of pseudonyms. I wonder if bringing in Fernando Pessoa’s term ‘heteronym’ might expand this point. Mouré’s names seem somewhat stronger than a mere pseudonym, though not as strongly developed as Pessoa’s heteronyms. Might there be a middle ground between these two poles here, as well? (A pseudo-heteronym?) It might also be worth mentioning/thinking through that *Pillage Laud* is the first text, if my memory can be trusted, where Mouré plays with her authorial name.”

very genre of the lyric and its implication of a speaking- and writing-subject. She writes, “[a]s it is, their [the pseudonyms’] mobility and their multiplicity sound their author’s repeated challenges to that genre” (35). In a text they write together, Caroline Bergvall also notes that as Mouré’s work proliferates, so do her names (167). Bergvall terms the pseudonym in this case a “social-authorial name” in which “each new spelling is a signature in the narrative and structural, rather than the performative sense” (168). Bergvall suggests, then, that the multiple nature of Mouré’s poetic voice points to the impossibility of a clearly defined feminine or feminist voice to adhere her work to the tradition of Canadian feminist poets, to which Mouré responds in agreement: “My mother tongue is silence” (174). Thus the “Erin Mouré”/“Erín Moure” who authors this book presents her name with a shifted accent, and, more importantly, leaves her name on the book’s cover in quotation marks, admitting that even this varied act of naming is arbitrary, and that it suggests much more closure than the reality of social authorship permits. The suggestion is that authorship only ever arises out of collaboration and communication, and in this way Mouré refuses the essentialism of an expressive, personal mother tongue in favor of the multiple voices not only of her multiple writing-selves, but of the very indeterminate nature of the collaborative text itself.

Addendum: In response to Andy’s comment, I would like to point out that Mouré works more directly with Pessoa’s concept of the heteronym in her collection *Sheep’s Vigil by a Fervent Person*. Nonetheless, *Pillage Laud* is indeed the first time that one of her collections is attributed to an authorial name that differs slightly from her own, a tradition she would continue throughout her career, as footnote seven demonstrates. For Pessoa, the heteronym is a character different from the author who is created in order to write in a different style. Pessoa’s heteronyms vary in terms of development of the character and difference from Pessoa, the literal human who creates these variant identities. Mouré’s slight variations in the spelling and accent of her name are informed by heteronyms, but do not usually amount to the creation of entirely different individual characters. Instead, they are “misspellings” of the author’s *real* name used to allow for a greater freedom of variety in the style of the poetry produced under these names, especially useful in her numerous translations, a “translation” of the self rather than the creation of a new self, which is especially useful for her translation work.

So, we arrive at a point where we must treat collaborative authorship quite differently than the subjective authorship of the lyric. This collaboration is also somewhat different from the technological collaboration of, for example, Mac Low's interaction with his diastatic programs. Rather than treating the computer output as raw product with which the poet works to produce a text, Mouré's collaboration with the computer in *Pillage Laud* privileges technology as co-producer insofar as the poet herself merges with the machine in order to place her own subjectivity in flux. This is what Lori Emerson argues in her article "Materiality, Intentionality, and the Computer-Generated Poem." Emerson observes that the use of pseudonym and computer generation together signal to Mouré's readers that "the border of a name is not a straight line [and] has no final point either" (175). Emerson writes that "Mouré's poems are material objects devoid of authorial intention at the same time as they are material objects that reveal her intentions or the intentions to the programmer/writer" (48). The text therefore must constantly negotiate the relationship between machine and human, or between intentionality and intentionlessness (49), understanding that at its core this is a tension between material and intention, not a binarism (51). If, as so many critics have ascertained in the past half a century, the poststructural conceptions of the author do not account for the materiality of the text, then the materiality as manifestation of process in a computer-generated text must open us up to the consideration of intention—as my own work has done throughout this project—even where intention cannot justly be traced. That is, I can, by relying on collaboration and materiality, read the line quoted above—"The writer orbits me. My line (article) has sighed"—as emblematic of social and agential experimental authorship, even though clearly the computer did not and cannot intend for me to read its cryptic "line (article)" as such. Even in a computer-generated text, Emerson maintains, intention must be considered (57). While Emerson and others (including

Weaver and Michael Joyce) maintain that issues of paratext will always be more obvious markers of interpretation, I would argue that the collaborative nature of the computer-generated text signals that these paratextual clues are merely signposts rather than laneways to guide interpretation. Because readers understand that *Pillage Laud*'s intentionality is complicated by computer-generation, paratextual notes such as the one that describes the book as "lesbian sex poems" should be taken as a suggestion, and one that is at least in part tongue-in-cheek. The book is indeed a collection of lesbian sex poems, but it also is distinctly *not*—while the poems use the lexicon of erotic poetry, none of the poems can be adequately or exclusively labelled a lesbian sex poem, largely *because* of the computer's role in the collaboration. After all, what could a computer really say about eros?

Reading *Pillage Laud* as collaboration with a machine means also that I read this text, ostensibly, as a collaboration between Mouré and Charles O. Hartman, who created the MacProse program used to produce the text. This question is brought up by rob mclennan on his blog post reviewing the BookThug reprint of *Pillage Laud* in 2011. I quote mclennan at length:

if the computer program was designed by Charles O. Hartman, does this actually make the final product, the book-length *Pillage Laud*, a collaboration between Hartman and Moure? And what does this have to do with language, how words mean? How does such a work alter the considerations we bring to poetry? I've heard arguments that poetry created through such processes ... became negated as poems for their perceived lack of "authorial intent." Do we need to know what an author was thinking to read a single line, a single poem? I would hardly think so. It's not always what made the pieces, but what the pieces, in fact, *become* that matter in the end; how they exist as pieces, how they exist as poems. Despite what

some of the language poets might tell you, words can't help but *mean*, and the meanings emerge through how the words are combined.

Ascribing the same agency to the text itself that Weaver sees in *Pillage Laud*'s paratext, McLennan here suggests that the text means on its own, and that this process of meaning making is something the text can't help but do. While this does seem to support a reading of the text as indicating our own passive consumption of language, it doesn't account for the ways in which the text questions *who* gets to mean and *how* this meaning can be attributed to a speaking voice. There is no language without a speaking voice, even in the indeterminate, experimental text. Mouré insists on reminding us of this. In the poem "In Tenebris, or *The Gate*," included towards the end of the book, she keeps us from relishing the utopian radical potentials of the unegoic text, reminding us once and for all that "[t]his is just a copped line from MacProse" (99). But, this is not to say that the speaking voice of the text is inherent to, or even exclusively produced by, the text. Instead, any speaking voice of any text is necessarily produced by the complex interplay of the speaking subject of the text and the reading voice of the audience. All of this is complicated by the fact that the "speaking subject of the text" is itself already collaborative, social, and constantly in flux.

We must thus read both Howe and Mouré as assemblage authors. There are names written on the covers of both books to denote an authorial persona, but in both cases these names are complicated provocations and misdirections as much as they are statements of fact: Mouré writes with the aid of the computer, the MacProse program, and Hartman in direct connection to her writing-self; Howe writes with the complex authorship of the original *Eikon Basilike* and the historical and literary figures involved in this authorial mystery in indirect connection to her writing-self. They both present an understanding of authorship as, like Bruns wrote of Howe, an

authorial self produced by the amalgamation and appropriation of other voices. Rather than avoiding or reducing the presence of the authorial self in their texts, Howe and Mouré instead radically rethink the role of the feminist experimental poet. They thus open up a space for us to locate an agential author in the socially produced text. As DuPlessis urges in her article, a postanarchist literary theory acknowledges that it is not enough to simply look at authorship as complicated or as minimally egoic. Rather Howe's *Eikon Basilike* and Mouré's *Pillage Laud* afford us the rare opportunity of using the interventionary authorship of these poets to discuss the role of a gendered and subjective presence in these experimentally produced texts. They are feminist authors, to be sure, but they are also first and foremost social authors writing as assemblages and producing texts that invite their readers to similarly insert themselves into the social matrix from which each text emerges.

Language VOL II: *Logos* and the Feminist Experimental Poet

Following the discussion of Mouré above, I would like to revisit *Eikon Basilike*'s relationship to subjectivity. I realize at this point that my earlier observations about Howe's complex relationship to subjectivity ignore one important element of this text: that it patently refuses to withdraw its subjectivity, its lyric "I," even as it clearly works to dismantle the structures of language and authority that make that lyric subject possible. From the personal/autobiographical anecdote that begins the text to the image of Ariadne's thread that weaves through the text, a speaking subject—a storyteller—is persistent throughout. Of course, *Eikon Basilike* demonstrates a discomfort with the ways that language governs subjectivity. But, what is more interesting and more important for postanarchism is that the text also refuses to withdraw that subjectivity, not unlike my discussion of Levertov. Howe is not concerned about expressing the personal; her refusal to withdraw subjectivity warns against a worldview in which the subject

is not understood as a linguistic construct. That is, Howe reinserts the subject into the historical text to show that the subject is produced and governed by text, *by language*. For scholar Uta Gossman, this reinsertion of the “I” entails in *Eikon Basilike* a working-backwards, a kind of anarcho-primitivist politic that resists what she sees as language’s increasing ability to govern us as subjects. She writes, “[r]eversing the evolution of language also implies going back to a world less dissected, analyzed, and categorized by language that the increasing verbalization of culture has entailed over time” (105). I would argue, though, that this anti-evolutionary rhetoric mischaracterizes Howe’s poetic project in *Eikon Basilike*. Howe does not want to turn back an apparent “verbalization” of society, but rather to force herself into the structures of history and authority, both necessarily grounded in language. She thus refuses to be explained away by these structures. She emphasizes the subjective activity and experience of constructing a text rather than letting textual production dematerialize and pretending that language functions as a natural process. It is not enough for Howe to remove herself from Gossman’s “verbalization,” or perhaps better, overcoding. In fact, such a tactic would be, in light of the politics latent in *Eikon Basilike*, politically ineffectual or even politically damaging. So, instead, she forces a very personal, very real writing-self into the larger structures of the text.

The best way to think about the problematic of the asserted (and inserted) self in *Eikon Basilike* is through Perloff’s argument that Howe’s work walks a line between a LANGUAGE poetics and a more traditional lyric sensibility. Perloff sees the lyric in action in Howe’s work despite the fact that Howe’s detractors frequently argue that her “cryptic” writing necessarily prevents the expressivity one typically wants from the lyric (“Language Poetry” 426). Howe is both concerned with the constructed nature of the LANGUAGE poem and interested in interrogating a lyric self, partially, Perloff argues, because she occupies a different position than

the heterosexual white men that dominate the LANGUAGE tradition: “Howe’s ‘I’—female, maverick, only half New England Blueblood—is much less of an insider, much more self-conscious about her particular origins” (430). She argues that Howe “rarely speaks in her own person ... preferring the voice of the chronicler ... and the voices of others” (430-1). Thus we must understand Howe’s critique of history and authority as one grounded in forcing the individual subject back into structures that would be impersonal, in order that her work not give way completely to cryptic, apersonal formalism.

This is the primary concern of Ming-Qian Ma in “Poetry as History Revised,” where she reads Perloff as arguing that Howe impinges biography on the lyric consciousness (719). Ma expands on Perloff’s arguments, insisting instead that Howe fuses history and fiction together in order to expose that divide as artificial (717). For Ma, the absent centre king in *Eikon* is both authority and the origin of meaning. Thus, Ma posits that in writing—though she here is referring specifically to another of Howe’s long poems, “Scattering Behaviour Toward Risk”—the poet has a “perceptual meeting” with literary and recorded history (720), rather than simply a chronicling. This is necessarily a feminist position. “History is seen by the poet,” Ma continues, “as a series of reoccurring vengeances initiated from patriarchal perspectives and inflicted upon a woman not for what she has done but for what she is” (728-9). By collapsing the artificial divide between history and fiction, Howe demonstrates a now commonplace understanding of history as simply a story that gains credibility through its repetition (729). Howe’s work intersects with Derrida in this mistrust of the logocentric *truth* behind writing (and its ability to be conveyed by a writing subject). As Derrida writes in *Disseminations*,

The truth of writing, that is, as we shall see, (the) nontruth, cannot be discovered in ourselves by ourselves. And it is not the object of a science, only of a history

that is recited, a fable that is repeated. The link between writing and myth becomes clearer, as does its opposition to knowledge, notably the knowledge one seeks in oneself, by oneself. (79-80)

It follows that rather than attempting to articulate a history that would be somehow external to the logocentrism on which the very notion of history is built, Howe's poetic project is one that insists on inserting or reinserting the personal into the narratives of history.

Keeping both Perloff's and Ma's comments in mind, we must thus read Howe as following a poetics similar to that put forth by Charles Bernstein in his verse essay "Artifice of Absorption." Bernstein argues that the primary goal of the LANGUAGE poem is to destroy "utilitarian & / essentialist ideas about meaning" (18), which is to say that the LANGUAGE poem is not concerned with expressivity or with encoding a meaning that will ultimately be decoded by a reader or critic. Rather, the telos of the LANGUAGE poem is "[n]ot to describe or incant but to *be* / the thing described" (25, *emph. mine*). In this poetics, authorial identity in poetry (of which the lyric subject is just one manifestation) must be understood not simply as a reflection of monadic identification, but also potentially as a refusal to be absorbed, thus functioning as alternative and resistance (20). In Bernstein's terms, absorption (the refusal of artifice, the acceptance of dematerialization of the writing process as the telos of language) functions as an ideological state apparatus, and thus the use of artifice or impermeability (29) to oppose or resist or refuse this absorption is an ideological or political act (53). In this light, we must read Howe's poetics as literally embodying the lyric subject into the disjointed text, employing those elements of a LANGUAGE poetics that she finds salient. What's more, because of Ma's insistence on the feminine and feminist impetus behind Howe's insertion of the personal into the historical, we must read *Eikon Basilike*'s almost overwhelming repetition of the lyric "I"

as indicative of Howe's larger feminist project of scepticism towards the eradication of the authorial persona. As she famously stated in an interview, which I quote in my introduction, the refusal of authorial control is "alluring—but problematic for women writing/reading poems" (Guthrie n.p).

To support all of this theorizing, I would like to look to the many manifestations of the first-person pronoun in *Eikon Basilike*. What I would like to assert here is that despite Howe's tenuous allegiance to LANGUAGE poetry, the lyric "I" is actually not as removed from this text as I may have suggested earlier. In fact, "I" is everywhere: the lyric "I" appears on nearly every page of the text, most often in statements of identity or intent. For example, a set of mirrored pages include "I" twice each: "that I hide" and "I am weary of life" (56-7). They also contain the exclamatory "O make me / of Joy." Other appearances of the "I" are as follows: "I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible Crown" (59); "Side of space I must cross" (61); "I am a seeker" (twice) and "Tell you my author / I knew his hand" (64); "Saying so I name nobody" (66); "I am afraid of him [Milton]" (71); and both "I saw madness of the world" and "I feared the fall of my child" (74). Strikingly, these examples both suggest intent or identity as well as an absence, a negativity, or an instability. For every "I" that speaks there is a "nobody," a "seeker," a "space" that must be "crossed." The personal pronoun also appears a number of times in the lengthy references to Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* towards the text's end: first, "I Become Friendly with Mr. Dick" (77), and then the "I" appears ten times in the Dickens quotation on page eighty-one. Here the authorial representation of the lyric subject is thwarted by the allusion, effectively adding another voice to the collaborative authorship of the text.

"I" also appears in various other, non-signifying, instances throughout the text; if I am to insist on the visual and material importance of textual disruptions, I must similarly read these

appearances of the shape of the “I” as gestures toward an imposingly asserted subjectivity. Some of these are as simple as the seemingly random appearance of “Brazen Wall I” (54), a clear image of artifice. Some are admittedly stretches in my own reading practice, as in “1 blank leaf” (68), an example that, for me, almost immediately recalls E. E. Cummings’s poem that meditates on the I/I, and the dual-meanings of “leaf,” “l(a.” The most important of these examples is the letter “I” that appears over and over again in the text in “Charles I,” whose designation provides Howe with the ability to repeatedly insert a subjectivity into the text without relying too heavily on the presence of a lyric subject. On page eighty, the link between this king, the process of writing and producing bibliographies, as well as the construction of history, are all brought to the fore in the imposingly capitalized lines: “K CHARL | WORKS | VOL I / K CHARLE | WORKS | VOL II.” With both the use of the capitalized “I” and the vertical bar—which is used in programming to denote the logical term “or”—the presence of the subject punctuates the incomplete names and volumes. Rather than refusing subjectivity, as I might have argued earlier, it seems that *Eikon Basilike* obsessively inserts the “I” into a history made porous and unstable through language. The result is the production of a poetic subject that bridges the gap between the impersonality of these larger structures of history and the fiction of the closed subject and his/her expression in the lyric.

Mouré’s poetry, much like Howe’s, is primarily concerned with confronting the structures that govern our use of language. Extending the postanarchist desire to engage with and confront these structures rather than ignoring or attempting to dismantle them entirely, Mouré’s work uses translation, nonlinearity, and, in the case of *Pillage Laud*, indeterminacy, to direct attention to the ways in which our ability to communicate is limited by the structures of linguistic and textual production. As she discusses in her brief poetics piece with Caroline Bergvall, “O

Yes,” Mouré’s poetry has long been concerned with confronting these historically oppressive structures, arguing that effective political poetry must “unpack the ghosts of the past” (171). Though she is often dismissed by readers as too cerebral or academic in her work, Mouré’s career has been driven both by the affective force of her poetry *and* by her philosophical and theoretical interest in politics. In her published correspondence with fellow Canadian poet Bronwen Wallace, *Two Women Talking: Correspondence 1985-87*, the two address this issue head-on in a heated exchange that comes to a boiling point over the role of critical theory in the production of poetry. Mouré laments the “hierarchization of theory and the creative act” (29), requiring that the new feminist poetic must be interested in both creativity and theory equally. This merging of political philosophy and poetics interests me most and positions Mouré as perhaps the most effective feminist poet in this project.

In *Two Women Talking*, Mouré insists that feminist poetics must not limit itself to its earlier concerns of maternal figures, embodiment, mythology, and reclamation, as these tactics seemed to only reinforce the typical relegation of the feminine in literature. Instead, the feminist poet for Mouré, as my discussions of postanarchism also prioritize, must draw attention to the fractures in the existing structures. S/he must “*writ[e] out of the dislocation of speaking from negative space, non-space*” (20, *emph.* Mouré’s), which Mouré posits as a facet of deconstruction. Mouré’s understanding of deconstruction is at once a gross oversimplification and an excellent way of focusing the frequently obtuse literary theory for effective feminist gains. She writes to Wallace saying: “The term deconstructionist theory just means to me that we have to question the structure/systems/origins of our own media as we are engaged in using them” (39). What follows is a close look at the ways in which *Pillage Laud* works to turn the

gaze back onto these structures/systems/origins, writing in excess of them and at times transgressing them.

In much of Mouré's work, these structures are manifest in the theoretical concept of the archive as discussed by Derrida in *Archive Fever*. For Derrida, the archive, from *arkhē* (or first thing), is concerned with both "the *commencement* and the *commandment*" (1). It is "the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given" (1). Inscription, the process of archiving, is "what permits one to justify the distinction between memory and archive" (27), and thus the radical potentials of memory permit deviation from archive, the control of which is central to political power. After all, as Derrida states plainly, "[t]here is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory" (5). The archive is the underpinning of social order, of power exerted over subjectivities. Reading Mouré against the archive is not an entirely unique practice. Isabel A. Moore, in her article "Lyric Fever: Erin Mouré and the Queer Anatomy of the Lyric Body," translates Derrida's "archive fever," the reactionary fear of the disruption of archival knowledge, into a "lyric fever," which justifies the critical discomfort with Mouré's queering of text and authorship. Moore argues that Mouré refuses the binaries of poetry versus philosophy, or LANGUAGE poetry versus lyric poetry (37), which set the stage for many of the negative reviews of her work.⁹ These critical responses, she argues, demonstrate a fear that the lyric subject has already given way to the poststructuralist and LANGUAGE destabilizations

⁹ Moore details the reviews of Mouré's work that consider the poet too interested in philosophy and theory. She quotes one review, for example, as saying that one of Mouré's collections, *Little Theatres*, was more interested in a statement of philosophical poetics than in poetry itself. The reviewer, Moore writes, "wished she 'would check her poetics at the door when publishing her poetry' [as it was] too often 'inf(1)ected' ... by political philosophy" (37).

of it (39). Thus, a “lyric fever” serves as a kind of spectral subject surrounding Mouré’s work (51), confronting the reader with manifestations and dissolutions of the lyric subject throughout.

Mouré doesn’t look to destroy the archive, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which archival knowledge and its production of subjectivities governs our lives. In line with this, Weaver suggests that she produces a sub-archive. He works from Foucault’s elaborations of the archive, positing that *Pillage Laud* exposes the archive as nonuniversal, and thus unnatural (296). Following this, Weaver argues that Mouré’s work in *Pillage Laud* produces a “sub-archive” in which new understandings of the archive of language are presented. “The point of the sub-archive,” he writes, “is to draw attention to the authorial relationship to the archive of language and to modify, not destroy, that relationship” (298). *Pillage Laud*, more overtly than the other feminist poets in this project, draws attention to the typically complicit nature of traditional authorship in the archive of language. The text, as its introductory note tells us, “selects from pages of computer-generated sentences to produce lesbian sex poems, by pulling through certain found vocabularies” (n.p.). The jacket blurb of BookThug’s reprint details the particularities of its production; it uses “MacProse, freeware designed by American poet Charles O. Hartman as a generator of random sentences based on syntax and lexicon internal to the program” (n.p.).

By positioning the production of the text as a collaboration between poet and computer, Mouré’s text must be read as grappling with memory, as Derrida describes it, and as she herself describes it in her essay, “Poetry, Memory and the Polis,” collected in *Language in Her Eye*. For Mouré, memory in poetry is not dependent on semantics or on textual meaning; instead, she argues that it finds its manifestation in “[t]he sound of words” (201). And yet, because its very inscription draws attention to the archive, to the way that memory is archived, Mouré acknowledges that the poem is not and cannot function outside of the archive. Instead, she

suggests that “[p]oetry, I think, is the *structuration . . . of memory* that can undo the Law of the City, because it both precedes and transgresses the Law” (202). It is integral here that she says “transgresses” and not “avoids”; the fact that memory is external to, or precedes, the Law as archive does not mean that it can function without it. Poetry should seek not necessarily, or not only, to “break [the Law] down” but to “peel it back and reveal its brokenness, the non-congruity behind it” (204). In essence, *Pillage Laud* is a text of memory, which seeks to destabilize the archive and to draw attention to the ways in which the ephemerality and flux of memory is structured by the archives of language. Memory is—like the aural that Bernstein describes as preceding the oral, which I discuss in my previous chapter—that which precedes the structuration of graphism. In the aurality of memory, Mouré sees the radical potential of poetry to use sound, itself ephemeral to some degree, to complicate and transgress the Laws of logos. She neither ignores nor refuses the larger structures of the logos, but rather looks to the fissures in language that poetry can make obvious to help to transgress these otherwise limiting structures.

One of the ways that *Pillage Laud* does this is through retaining the traditional structures of language (grammar, syntax, spelling) while disrupting others (meaning, sense, logic). While this decision has led some readers to dismiss this text as merely reifying language rather than interrogating it,¹⁰ I would like to argue that Mouré works through these structures to expose them, to peel them back revealing the archive behind the curtain. Like Howe, Mouré presents the reader with images of literal archives (libraries, dictionaries, museums, and so on) that are forced in the indeterminacy of this text to confront their own boundaries. Like Howe’s speaker sleeping

¹⁰ In Weaver’s dissertation, for example, he argues that Mouré retains the aesthetics of Language poetry without the politics. In Mouré’s eschewing of the New Sentence in favour of more traditional syntax, Weaver sees her work as politically ineffectual, presenting the images of radical politics uncritically and thus unpolitically (293).

in the library (an image I will discuss more thoroughly later), Mouré's computer-generated speaker forces the warmth of the body and the pleasure of tactility into the cold stacks: "After she rolled, libraries were your virtues" (50); "Certain libraries swelled the companion's brevity" (38); "The library should observe the empire of respect, the / vertebrate of custom" (61); "so texture a library was" (36). In other moments, the library is positioned as a site of displeasure: "Certain theorems are the libraries of bitterness" (14). On occasion, the library is characterized as a site of illumination. On page seventeen the speaker observes "so / tremendous a library spent light"; on page sixty-nine, the speaker notes "a brilliant library." At first I was tempted to read these examples as Mouré's presentation of the library as a site of radical knowledge; these images of illumination seemed to be positive and potentially helpful. But, upon further analysis, it would seem that the concept of a library as luminescent and bestowing its light ("spen[ding]" it) is much more in line with an Aristotelian view of literature's ability to illuminate the reader to the reality of the universe. Just as M. H. Abrams aligned this Aristotelian view with a lamp, Mouré aligns the library with luminescence, the ability to direct its readers to a clearly-viewed, and ultimately clearly-archived, reality. These positive metaphors thus serve as the misleading or seductive properties of the library, a place that purports to be about freedom and creative discovery but instead serves as an archive that would seek to limit and delimit live memory and the radical potentials of a freedom to make rhizomatic connections. It may dismay some readers that Mouré paints the library in such a negative fashion; the texts themselves are not the problem, but rather their organization in the library as archive is what poses the problem. Even this can be disrupted by the presence of the body and its radical possibilities in that space.

Even more denigrated than the library, the dictionary is represented in *Pillage Laud* as a site of violence and oppression in which the speaker (with apparent exasperation) questions,

“What may the dictionary insist?” (19). The dictionary is represented, in one case, through the violent imagery of bondage and electricity: “the model of rope—voltage—is her dictionary” (25). In another, the dictionary occupies the position of authority: “A dictionary especially rules” (26). The dictionary is also presented as a set of rules that seeks to include and envelop more and more. The speaker bemoans: “Why does every dictionary extend?” (57). The dictionary requires not grammar and syntax, but rather sense, logic, and limited definition, the structures of language that Mouré finds most destructive and most in need of disruption. The image of the museum meets a similar fate, where its confrontation with the body initiates its destruction. Mouré’s speaker observes, for example: “While you drank me, museums vanished” (33). Even the light of the library proves ineffectual in the museum, whose primary concern is reification and inscription. The text asks, “Would the ray leave the museum of flesh?” (70), and receives no answer. Even the figure of the archive seems to fail here. The text, mocking the dismantled dictionary, provides its readers with a new definition of the term: “An archive: space, its vagabond between those roots and those / imitations” (68). This archive is empty (or emptied) and destabilized. Its former position of stability and uniformity (“those roots”) and its desire for mimesis, for representational linguistic sense (“those / imitations”) has been replaced by a nomadic condition (“its vagabond”). It occupies a liminal “between” rather than a binary of logic. Mouré, as one node in the complex authorship of *Pillage Laud*, guides her readers through the non-space of vanished museums. In *Pillage Laud* we are not without archive; we are with the new archive. Mouré as both reader and writer of this text repositions this discussion. She boasts: “I am your historian” (92).

In the end, Mouré transgresses the archive by writing in excess of it. And excess is a term that must be usefully integrated into any critical discussion of Mouré’s work as a whole. The

concept of Mouré's excess has been best analyzed by Susan Rudy in "“what can atmosphere with / vocabularies delight’: Excessively Reading Erin Mouré.” Here, Rudy argues that excess is a trademark of Mouré's work, in terms of both form and content. She characterizes this “excess” as follows: Mouré “writes in excess of signification; refuses conventional word order and usage; redeploys grammar, punctuation, syntax, and spelling” (205). This excessive signification—which refuses to be fully inscribed by the archive, to be placed among the library stacks or under the museum glass—exposes the ways in which the archive limits our potential uses of language. Rudy sees in Mouré that the “relations between words is endlessly shifting” (210), and that this ultimately “generat[es] an excess of meaning” (211). I will dwell on these excesses throughout the remainder of this chapter; in them I hope to demonstrate the ways in which poetry can function as a temporary autonomous zone without ever suggesting the utopian dissolution of the structures in which it operates. In her excess, Mouré's poetic project again works in a similar fashion to Howe's, whose insertion of the fluctuating and ephemeral individual or personal into the larger structures of history and language can be read as similarly excessive. Both authors, by pointing to the fissures and discontinuities of these larger structures of the logos, demonstrate that a primary concern of the experimental feminist poet must be to generate these excesses of meaning. Both authors thus refuse to be fully categorized by the archive, offering instead a multiple and shifting “I” that moves deftly throughout the stacks of the library. Their new archive is that of the poem, the structuration of live memory that transgresses as it speaks.

Texts that Stain You: Affectively Reading in Common

As I have asserted throughout my project, any discussion of the role of the reader in a text is first and foremost a discussion of the role of the author and how s/he must be destabilized in order to leave room for a readership. I have shown that this discussion has clear roots in

poststructuralist literary theory—namely in the seminal discussions of authorship by Foucault and Barthes—and its denigration (or death-sentence) of the Author, a regicide in and of itself. In her analysis of Susan Howe in “Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject,” Perloff also foregrounds the discussions by Barthes and Foucault on authorship (407). In this essay, she argues that Barthes’s privileging of the reader—that is, the birth of the reader as a result of the death of the author—ultimately leads to a critical ventriloquism (411); the critic speaks as though s/he is an authority him or herself. This dominating critical discourse is, for Perloff as for myself, a step in the wrong direction. It simply reproduces a new (and in some ways more pervasive) Author-God or Author-King: the academy, the bibliography, the archive. Part of my project is to resist this critical ventriloquism. *Eikon Basilike* provides me with an effective means to discuss the ways scholarship can approach literature that resists reproducing or ventriloquizing the authority of the Author.

In this task, I am not alone. In fact, some of the critics that I have already discussed in this project have talked about how Howe’s work encourages us as readers to avoid this ventriloquism. They do this largely through a discussion of the ways in which *Eikon Basilike* works to engage readers on an active, affective level rather than encouraging the critical distance of a scholar who deciphers and decodes as he or she interprets a text. Dworkin, for example, argues that Howe’s non-grid writings “confound a reader’s expectations by eliminating the very direction axes on which those conventions are based” (32). Confronted with the task of reading without the traditional axes of conventional exegetical interpretation, Dworkin sees Howe’s reader as forced to engage with the form of the text in new and active ways. Bloomfield, too, argues that the visual disruption of the text encourages the physical engagement of the reader (417), especially through the literal need for the text to be physically manipulated—for example,

to be turned on its side or upside down—in order to be read. Brian Reed, in his essay “‘Eden or Ebb of the Sea’: Susan Howe's Word Squares and Postlinear Poetics,” also notes that Howe’s form encourages a new form of active reader engagement. While he does not discuss *Eikon Basilike* in particular, his arguments remain important. He writes that Howe “gives us language so stripped down, so denuded of syntax that a reader could essay it in any direction—horizontally, vertically, diagonally, or at random—without finding a path capable of arranging the word-nuggets into a coherent picture or narrative” (par. 13). All three of these critics argue that Howe engages with her readers in what I would like to call an *invitational*, rather than an expressive way, which is nonconventional to say the least. She thus invites the reader into a collective (a common) with the text, effectively rendering traditional scholarship and its concomitant ventriloquism ineffectual. To avoid this ventriloquism I read *Eikon Basilike* as an anarchist text for and by a popular and populist audience that invites its readers into an egalitarian, affective community.

There have been some attempts to extend this kind of affinitive rather than ventriloquizing scholarship, and some imply (though never directly engage with) the invitational elements I discuss. Norman Finkelstein’s reading of *Eikon Basilike* as séance in “‘MAKING THE GHOST WALK ABOUT AGAIN AND AGAIN’: History as Séance in the Work of Susan Howe,” for example, demonstrates the long poem’s capacity to include its readers in its processes of reading and writing. For Finkelstein, “the reader of Howe’s *Bibliography* is both witness to and participant in this frightening ‘eccentricity’” (230). By staging the text as a séance in which the ghosts of authority are simultaneously summoned and banished, Howe “exposes her readers to her daemon, which we discover to be our own” (233). Similarly, Miriam Marty Clark, in “The Library and the Wilderness: Susan Howe’s Pragmatism,” argues that Howe includes her

readers in a continuum of authors and texts that transforms the typically sterile atmosphere of the library, the site of bibliography and scholarship, into an anarchic wild. She writes that

In these recurrent figures—of the reader and the scholar as library cormorants, of thinking as telepathy, of prior voices as ghosts and vampires, of the library as wilderness—Howe establishes continuity between the singularity of texts and the ubiquity of information, between the materiality and temporality of the printed word and the virtuality and simultaneity of information. (380)

Clark is not discussing *Eikon Basilike* specifically, but we nonetheless find examples throughout the text of an attempt to forge affect and ephemerality out of the preserving and stultifying tendencies of archivization (in libraries, museums, etc), an act that should recall my analyses of Mullen on the subject of preservation and ephemerality. For example, trading in cold logic for warm affect, Howe juxtaposes the “[d]riest facts / of bibliography” (64) with “[t]his word *Remember*” (65). Appearing in the most lyric, readerly segments of *Eikon Basilike*, these opposing sides set a tone of searching the archive for bibliographical information, but finding instead the unquantifiable values of emotion, affect, and, surprisingly enough, security. Toward the poem’s end, Howe gives up searching for an “original text” (47) that her introduction already told us could not exist, writing instead “I am at home in the library / I will lie down to sleep” (75). Recalling Clark, Howe here transforms the dry, sterile space of the archive into a home filled with comfort and security by virtue of its misuse.

Rendering the library a home for the already complicated lyric subject, Howe constructs a vision of texts as singularities within the multiplicitous continuum of textual discourse, and in this way she encourages us to read *Eikon Basilike* as populist in nature, and anarchist in its assertions of the radical potentials of the people. One aspect of this populist reading is the

secretive and difficult ways in which the text *encodes* its stories. For Rachel Tzvia Back, much of the text is “encoded” as a way to communicate to the reader while trying to remain hidden from the omnipresent eye of an elusive and invasive government. She writes, for example, that “[t]he unconventional spellings and word placements of the epigraph poem may also be read as a type of encoding, particularly as the motif of clandestine messages is a central thematic and form thread of the *Eikon*” (133). For Back, the rationale for this encoding is linked to the discussions of textual violence that permeate Howe scholarship:

The reason for the encoding, I believe, is not only to evoke the historical reality and dangers surrounding the captive king, but to hint at the dangers (of hostility, of erasure, of misrepresentation) waiting for any writer choosing a mode of literary expression that fails to conform to expectations and conventions. (133)

It is important that this encoding, as palimpsestic overwriting, also “produces the additional and no less significant effect of simultaneity of voices—and of tales—speaking at once, cutting into each other and being, visually and aurally—as well as thematically—at cross-purposes” (139).

Gesturing towards the popular, to the people outside of or external to governing authority, *Eikon Basilike* must be read as an invitation for the common, for the individual to read an encoded message written in the hidden language of communality, a code that cannot, by its very nature, be decoded.

Of course, the book that is this poem’s namesake was also a book “of the people.” As Howe notes in her introduction, “[o]n the day of the execution *The Eikon Basilike, The Pourtraicture of His Sacred Majestie in his Solitude and Sufferings*, was published and widely distributed throughout England, despite the best efforts of government censors to get rid of it” (47). In the name of these state-sanctioned efforts, “[p]rinters of the *Eikon Basilike* were hunted

down and imprisoned. But in spite of many obstacles the little book was set in type again and again. During 1649 fresh editions appeared almost daily and sold out at once” (47). Thus, the *Eikon Basilike* in its “original,” whatever text that might be, is itself a symbol of the proliferation of the common even under the strict eye of a supposedly anti-monarchical government. The rapidly reproduced and constantly fluctuating “original” of the *Eikon Basilike* serves, despite its claiming of royal lineage, as an antiauthoritarian, antigovernmental symbol that refuses the closed structures of the library and its requirements of an Author in favour of the immateriality of the common.¹¹ As Howe herself writes, “the material object has become immaterial” (50). The text embodies a resistance to the bibliography and the archive, an anarchist pamphlet that invites its readers to sleep in the library beside it. It is thus unsurprising, though no less important, that in the very center of the previously discussed mirrored pages, Howe includes as the centre, “The People / Contemporary History” (56/7).

And yet, as Weaver’s comments to me indicate, while the original *The Eikon Basilike* was indeed a “people’s book” circulated against state regulation among the greater population, it was also a book meant to celebrate—and indeed to deify—a monarch, and to encourage the return of monarchical rule to England, a return that came and has, in many ways, continued. We cannot read the text as purely anti-governmental if it is ultimately a text that supports the Divine Right of Kings and the reinstatement of a clearly problematic monarchical rule. Instead, the voice of the king is presented rather than beheaded in Howe’s text, and the result is not reification but

¹¹ Comment by Andy Weaver (23/4/14): “I wonder if there’s more to make of the content of the *Eikon Basilike* and Howe’s choice to deal with that book—specifically, when you say ‘The rapidly reproduced and constantly fluctuating ‘original’ of the *Eikon Basilike* serves, despite its claiming of royal lineage, as an antiauthoritarian, antigovernmental symbol that refuses the closed structures of library and its requirements of an Author in favour of the immateriality of the common,’ I’d agree—but, I’m not so sure it’s only that going on. After all, the *Eikon Basilike* itself, regardless of its being a ‘people’s book,’ as you say, was also a book specifically designed to celebrate a monarch and to bring about a return to monarchy. I guess what I’m wondering is, does Howe, through her choice of generant/allusive text, promote (or disclose?) a more fraught relationship between centralized and decentralized power?”

rather the addition of the king's voice into the irreducibility of the common. The king's voice does not speak for or (worse) *to* the people, but rather as a part of the people in Howe's *Eikon Basilike*. It is included into the communal narrative, added, just like Howe as the beheaded-Author-King, as just another subjectivity in the social authorship of the text's production. Read in the most extreme way, Howe's text does not support a monarchy despite the fact that her generant text did: she includes the ghost of a king as one reader; she includes herself as another; and, she makes all readers authors.

Similarly, Mouré works in *Pillage Laud* to make her readership a part of the vast social authorship of the text. In the aforementioned DuPlessis article, she argues that the reader of *Pillage Laud* performs the text, and that the reader is thus a writer as well, but only insofar as the author/ writer herself is considered to be just one subjectivity in the multiplicity of textual production (989). Rudy's reading of Mouré's work places particular attention on the ways in which the complication of authorship produces what she terms a "communal narrative" (212). Even Mouré herself, in her collaborative essay with Caroline Bergvall, insists that all of reading (of her own work or otherwise), is "inherently a practice of exchange, or responsiveness" arguing in the exact phrasing of Duncan that it is "radically communal" (170). Later, recalling DuPlessis's arguments about textual performance, Mouré and Bergvall position the reading of poetry in particular as a kind of "enactment" (175). Certainly a text like *Pillage Laud*, with its explicit confrontation of individualized authorship via computer collaboration, opens itself to new and various forms of reading processes. The process of the text's production signposts the intentional fallacy better than perhaps any of the other experimental texts in this project; Mouré's level of engagement in the process of computer generation is unclear at best. And yet, I must also point out that she does guide the reading process in ways that other indeterminate texts in my

project do not. For example, Mouré's designation of *Pillage Laud* as a book of "lesbian sex poems" guides readers into exegetical territory in a way that, for example, Mac Low's *Stein Poems* do not. By ascribing a way of reading the content of the poems, Mouré engages with her readers in a way that moves beyond a description of process. *Pillage Laud* develops a poetics of indeterminacy that directly addresses a communal readership rather than expressing a disinterest in the ways in which the text would or could be read.

For some readers, this gesture towards content without the delivery of narrative is misleading, a red herring that tells readers what they will find in the text, and subsequently ensures that the readers cannot and do not find what was promised. For Weaver, this authorial guidance is actually the imposition of a limitation on the reader in that the text gestures towards narrative without also including the potential release of selfhood in the form of narrative suture. Weaver suggests that Mouré's designation of *Pillage Laud* as a book of lesbian sex poems imposes an interpretation in a way that Cage and Duncan do not (270). Instead, the text functions in a rather traditional fashion. Weaver argues that "the reader can make sense of these sentences, since the text does not call signification into question" (279). Certainly, the poems draw attention to deviations in diction and sense, but not to meaning-making itself. The words may take on strange new uses, but the "referents are hardly ever missing" (291). The text simultaneously invites traditional readership and distances itself from it, and for Weaver this is the crux of the text's limitations. That is, the reader is thus limited in his/ her ability to lose him/ herself in the text; maintaining traditional grammar without traditional narrative ultimately provides no narrative suture, and thus no destabilization of the reader's *self* (280). What I would like to argue here is that the core of Mouré's destabilization of authorship is precisely in this disconnect between grammar and narrative. In its cyborg authorship—its merger of human and computer—

Pillage Laud approximates sense without delivering. It enacts a narrative suture without delivering and relies on the (very human) reader to fill in those gaps. As the text itself boasts, “Its suture presence (ventricle) was skin” (38). Essentially, Weaver charges the text with traditional narrative and authorial limits on the text because its sentences do not question meaning-making or signification. What I would argue instead is that Mouré’s retention of traditional grammar and the guise of narrative (even in the form of these paratextual clues) demonstrate the radical potentials of the language we already have rather than requiring the invention of entirely new modes of communication. Therein lies its greatest efficacy.¹²

I would like to talk for a moment about this textual merging of technology and “skin,” or humanity, positioning *Pillage Laud* as a cyborg book produced out of confrontation between the two forms. For Lori Emerson, the fundamental difference between the computer-generated poem and the more traditionally (read: humanly) produced text is that a cyborg authorship requires that criticism focus on the reader rather than either producer or object (47). The computer-generated poem, for Emerson, does not kill the author or render him/ her unimportant. Rather, it suggests that the author is just one meaning-producer along with (and equally weighted as) the reader or

¹² Editorial comment by Art Redding (14/1/15): “As I understand it, Andy claims that the writing is overly formalist, sterile, stiff, and that that, consequently, cripples its political potential. You disagree, and try to demonstrate why with your readings. OK, fine. BUT: what would be the criteria by which either of you could be proven right or wrong? There is none, outside of your two readings, right? That is, as you read, Mouré proves politically viable; as Andy reads, she doesn’t. This suggests that the political efficacy of the work can only be assessed as it is actualized by readings, audience, public, the commons, as it enters into circulation. Make sense? Where both of you have erred (sorry guys) is in trying to find political viability within the language of the poem itself. But it ain’t there. The politics might be there, intrinsic to the poem, but not the political efficacy. ... [F]or Andy, this avant-gardism is, paradoxically, precisely the problem—it boils down to sterile formalism. For Dani, results in a joyous, vital anarcho-feminism. How am I to decide? If you are both right (I think you both are), then you must both be wrong, methodologically.”

Addendum: I retain Art’s wording here because I think he both gets at the heart of the revolutionary potentials I see in Mouré’s work, as well as how the hermeneutics of even the most careful scholarship compromises those potentials. Andy and I are, of course, both wrong in asserting that the politics of the text lie in its enunciations exclusively. As my earlier work on Mac Low attests, the political efficacy of any work can only be observed in its “performance” by the reader.

the text itself, and that this is made especially apparent in the computer-generated text (55). The technology involved—MacProse, in this case—is further a fourth term in this collaborative meaning-making. Author Michael Joyce, a pioneer in digital texts, and hypertext in particular, suggests in a very early article in *Postmodern Culture* that the hypertextual or digital text¹³ requires that new and important emphasis be placed on the reader’s role in producing the meaning of the technologically entwined work. Joyce, whose hypertext novel, *afternoon, a story* (1990), is widely considered to be the first of its kind, suggests that the digitally produced text is, at the time when he was writing, necessarily exploratory, and thus requires a kind of exploratory reading. “This kind of reading of an exploratory hypertext,” he writes, “is what we might call empowered interaction. The transitional electronic text makes an uneasy marriage with its reader. It says: you may do these things, including some I have not anticipated” (par. 18). Even more bold than Emerson, Joyce contends that “[i]t is to an extent true that neither the author’s representations nor the initial topography but instead the reader’s choices constitute the current state of the text for her” (par. 19). The exploratory digital text, in this way, invites its readers to confront their role in the production of textual meaning.

First published in 1999, when digital poetry and technologically produced poetry was still relatively new and avant-garde, *Pillage Laud* is certainly exploratory. This is probably most

¹³ Comment by Andy Weaver (3/6/14): “Your turn to Michael Joyce is interesting, but I don’t find it as compelling—for one specific reason: *Pillage Laud* isn’t a digital text. I think that distinction needs to be made clearly and directly, and then perhaps you can work to adapt Joyce’s points.”

Response (4/6/14): “Oh but I firmly believe that (despite its print material) that *Pillage Laud* is indeed a digital text, or perhaps more appropriately a text of electronic literature. I should then spend some more time discussing what that means for me. It’s a highly contested definition, but I think at this point I’ve read enough that I can substantiate the inclusion of *Pillage Laud* in a digital discourse.”

Response by Andy Weaver (5/6/14): “O, good—we might get to have an intellectual fist fight over whether or not PL is an electronic text (actually, probably not—your clarification and change in terminology to ‘text of electronic literature’ seems reasonable ... but you should still define what you mean by that).”

evident in the ways that the text makes explicit its invitations for the reader to engage in the production of both meaning and, through metaphors, the text itself. “I may move me,” the poem’s speaker suggests, “but each of you longs¹⁴ to rule” (33). A few lines later, “each of you” is afforded even more agency in this process: “You appear to type” (33). Elsewhere, the text suggests that the reader is directly engaged in the “events” that are, in some form or another, “described” in the text. For example, amidst highly erotic discussions of the feminine body, a jarring line reads, “The audience snaps her form” (66). Later, we appear to be addressed as readers who occupy a position more valuable, even, than the speaker: “Dear one, I am the title, and you are the heights” (88). Authorship, in this line, is represented as authoritative in title only, quite literally. And, Mouré’s choice to include her name—in the BookThug reprint as Erín Moure—in quotation marks on the first edition’s cover seems to corroborate this line. We as readers are “the heights,” a suggestion of physical power that moves well beyond the name.

Additionally, the speaker questions not only the presence of an audience (a feature not uncommon even in lyric poetry), but also the function of the text itself. The speaker asks, for example: “Whom had the fresh poem mattered to?” (51); “Had we read?” (71); “to whom is this speaking machine hastening?” (91). The text is positioned as a “speaking machine,” a cyborg text that continues its speech as though it is a clearly-defined speaking subject communicating directly to a comprehending audience. In the text’s final poem, “to exist is reading,” the question

¹⁴ Comment by Andy Weaver (3/6/14): “You misquote (shame! shame!) the poem in your discussion of page 33: the quotation should be ‘I may move me, but each of you longs to rule’ (which would seem to support your point more strongly). And a thought about the second quotation you mention on p33: does it alter your interpretation if I read ‘You appear to type’ not only as a suggestion that the reader ‘creates’ the poem but also as a statement that ‘you’ (whoever that may be) appear (as in ‘come into being’ or ‘enter my perception’) according to pre-established types?”

Response (4/6/14): “Ah crap. I must have blended those two quotations in my head. But I absolutely love your suggestion of an additional element of that reading. You appear to type also suggests a reversal of the traditional reader gaze; you are made visible to the text, so the text gazes upon you (returns that gaze). Fascinating and beautiful.”

of readership and its relationship to the “speaking machine” is brought to the fore. The poem seems to meditate on the pages that preceded it, asking: “So mechanical a suggestion—how has everyone replied?” (103), and later, “Whom don’t the readers produce?” (104). In the end, the poem questions, in the event of the production of a text, whether it is even possible to imagine a text without a readership, an audience. It asks, “When to exist is reading, can listener stop?” (106), suggesting that a readership is produced at the same time as the text itself. This conception of readership as always already existing is where this “radically communal” element of reading is most clearly located. It is a place where the reader is free to enter, and thus to develop an ethical relationship in reading to both other readers and to the author. The text addresses not a potential audience but rather a very real audience. The “Eri(i)n Moure(é)” that authors *Pillage Laud* is thus presented as a first reader or, perhaps more appropriately, a microcosmic reader who functions as an audience synecdoche. “Moure(é)” figures her real audience into her work by simultaneously relating to and imagining into being, especially in this last poem, the vast multiplicity of her real, macrocosmic audience.

Pillage Laud’s common is one in which we must recognize our affective connections with various subjectivities—including the machines—involved in textual production. The text seems to recognize the extremely affective relationship between the enactment of the text and its production, explicitly stating at one point that “To read was an affection” (91). At the end of the book the speaker directly addresses this concern, writing “Those texts stain you. // You are some audience; / you expect affections” (102). The discomfort, the “stain,” brought on by the expectation of affect and the actual reception of the non-narrative, non-suturing, computer-generated text, produces the audience. This discomfort is especially productive, a kind of poetic terrorism that encourages political engagement in a way that other texts (even in their extreme

indeterminacy and nonsense) seemingly cannot. Howe's text, in its radical rethinking of monarchy through its inclusion of the ghost-king into the reader common, produces a similar discomfort. As the readers are invited to insert themselves, their live memory, into the "[d]riest facts / of bibliography" (64), they are invited into the same affective common that Mouré's text invites. Ultimately, both *Eikon Basilike* and *Pillage Laud* produce slightly different reader commons, though ones that are both built on affect and in the dismantling of larger, unemotional structures. If this affective common produces discomfort, it is all the more effective for it. After all, libraries aren't meant to be comfortable spaces for sleep.

Hauntological Spectres

I am particularly interested in the persistent images of ghosts, spectres, and hauntings throughout Howe's work, and in *Eikon Basilike* in particular. Reading through the criticism surrounding Howe, it would seem that I am not alone. Crown, for example, says Howe's authorship functions as though the author is hearing "voices" (490). Dworkin writes that her work contains the spectres of authority and sense, and that "these specters [sic] fuse with the violent silencings that haunt the history of literature itself" (37). Bruns appropriately argues in his discussion of anarchic sound-forms that "for Howe, sound is also pneumatic" (39), a term that is especially appropriate in that it designates not only the spiritual, but also a system run on absence (that is, the absence that is pressurized air). Moreover, according to the *OED*, the term also designates the feminine, especially the voluptuous or busty feminine. I would like to discuss the role of the spectral and the supernatural in *Eikon Basilike*, beginning with the often-discussed but nonetheless important element of prayer in the text. While I have not explicitly discussed it, the theme of prayer has been latent in my analyses so far through the epigraphic poem that begins "Oh Lord / o Lord," askew (51). The bending down of these lines has been read by many

critics as the bowing of one's head during traditional Christian (and especially Catholic) prayer. This bowing of the head, a prostration that denotes respect for a supernatural authority, recurs later in *Eikon* with the image of Charles I bending down in prayer before his execution: "He bowed down his head and said / two or three words / in a low voice" (59). While monarchical and echoing the divine right of kings, Howe's inclusion of this line amidst another mess of "visual prosody" emphasizes the imprecise and unclear nature of prayer and the tenuous relationship between the physical act of prostration and the ethereality of the spectral presence.

In *Eikon Basilike* the strange relationship between the physical and the ethereal in prayer is explicitly gendered through the image of Pamela, the feminine character who dominates the prayers included in the "original" text, prayers that preoccupy Howe, especially in her introduction. Of the inclusion of Pamela's prayer, Howe writes:

The prayer, a close paraphrase from 'no serious book, but the vain amatorious Poem of Sr [sic] Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*,' was the prayer of a pagan woman to an all-seeing heathen Deity. A captive Shepherdess has entered through a gap in ideology. 'Pammela in the Countesses Arcadia,' confronts the inauthentic literary work with its beginnings in a breach. (49)

For Howe, Pamela serves as the scapegoat for the accusations of forgery and inauthenticity placed on *Eikon Basilike*'s original, and she extends these charges of inauthenticity to Milton, who many critics accuse of having included the prayer himself in order to ridicule the authenticity of the authorship; these charges against Milton are also contested and tenuous, and Howe remarks that they have "been [both] confirmed, and denied" (49). Pamela features in Howe's text as the "heathen woman" on page sixty-seven, a feminine ghost that seems to circle the incantatory centre of the text.

Of course, to call the “centre” of this text anything, to suggest that it exists at all, is a misstep. As Howe reminds us at the end of her introduction to the poem, the text is structured around an absent centre, and “[t]he absent center is the ghost of a king” (50). Howe also tells us that she borrows this concept of the absent centre from Pierre Macherey, and in so doing immediately connects this absent centre to French poststructuralist Marxism. While Macherey seems a good fit for Howe’s absent and spectral poetics, I am tempted instead to draw the connection between this absent centre and Derrida’s concept of “hauntology.” The portmanteau hauntology is a deliberate homophone, recalling (especially in Derrida’s native French) ontology. With his characteristic wordplay, Derrida draws attention the difference between hauntology and ontology: where ontology depends upon certain concepts or structures, hauntology foregrounds the construction of such concepts, and the absences they are founded upon (*Specters* 63). In *Specters of Marx* he writes: “To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology” (202). The idea is, it seems quite clear, a readily available literary concept, and, in fact, Derrida uses literature throughout *Specters of Marx* to explain this idea of hauntology, namely in the Ghost of Hamlet, who serves not only as a symbol of the father figure that continuously haunts the son, but also as an image of father-son inheritance, as both Young Hamlet and the Ghost of King Hamlet are referred to by the same name, and Hamlet is in the position of heir, though that is usurped by Claudius. Hamlet does indeed inherit something from his father: a mission, a vengeance. But, in order to do so, Hamlet has to confront the spectre of his father, a fact Derrida notes himself: “One never inherits without coming to terms with some specter” (24). But, here the sexes match, and while this may appear arbitrary, when reading

inheritance as a gift from the psychoanalytic Father, gender is of the utmost importance, as I will demonstrate. Hamlet is male, and thus has access to his own paternal inheritance, whereas such inheritance is denied for the daughter; Ophelia inherits nothing from Polonius.¹⁵ For this reason, the hauntology of the daughter is complicated.

Howe's hauntological spectres are obvious. One of particular interest to me is the looming presence of Caesar's ghost throughout. In a moment of humour, Howe writes a "Great Caesar's ghost" (66) exclamation that reduces this particular spectre—the ultimate figure of Western rule and civilization—to rhetoric. Shortly after this, every figure of masculine authority, from Charles I to Oliver Cromwell, becomes Caesar as well (80). But Howe's representation of the hauntological is not so easy as "all authority is rhetoric," and *Eikon Basilike* constantly negotiates the space between a desire "To write against the Ghost" (61) and a desire for "MAKING THE GHOST WALK ABOUT AGAIN AND AGAIN" (47). The two goals are, I would argue, incommensurate. But, it is in their incommensurability that Howe approaches the problem of gender at the heart of the hauntological. That is, as I suggested above, hauntology is pretty clearly gendered; this issue has been skilfully interrogated by Nancy Holland in her article "The Death of the Other/Father," wherein she attempts to resolve Derrida's hauntology from a feminist perspective. In order to do so, she begins with the issue of the gaze, where the spectre looks upon the son (or in this case daughter), but the gaze is not, and cannot be, returned. For Holland, this gaze is complicated because the paternal gaze is not cast upon the daughter herself, but rather an idealized woman: "But what if the ghostly apparition that looks at us sees not we ourselves, we daughters as we are, but only its own ghost, the spectral image of what it wants to see, desires to see, must see when it looks at the female form?" (67). If we understand what

¹⁵ This is, I should add, probably a good thing. I don't know what Polonius would have that I would want to inherit.

Holland speculates to be the case, the hauntological inheritance for the daughter is more than non-reciprocal—it is not even received.

To complicate this further, Holland argues that in order to intercept this gaze, to inherit anything at all from the father, the daughter is also under the gaze of an ideal, almost maternal, figure. “The ghost who looks at me,” Holland writes, “the spectral Other I have internalized so thoroughly that in some sense it has become me, is not my father, or not only my father, but also my father’s vision of the eternal idealized woman he would have loved” (67). So, as Holland goes on to write, “[f]or the son, there is always the opportunity ... to exorcize the father’s ghost, through obedience and/or patricide” (ibid) or in the case of *Eikon Basilike*, regicide. But for the daughter in hauntology inheritance is complicated and a simple lineage is impossible. In “The Ghost of the Father,” Will Montgomery extends this image of the father in Howe’s work to authority and to law, which in *Eikon Basilike* amount to the complicated and nearly lost inheritance, or, in some cases, to the figure of the father himself. He writes that in Howe, “law is represented through an insubstantial paternal figure” (27). Recognizing the limitations of the patrilineal (the grid, the law, the *logos* that is disseminated along this lineage), “Howe’s poetry seeks to evade such limits, authorizing its indiscipline by appealing to a chaotic understanding of the sacred” (34). Towards the end of the poem it becomes crucial that Howe’s work rewrites the genre of the prayer from the perspective of the daughter who cannot meet the gaze of the Father. She writes:

In Authorem

Father and the Father

by my words will I be justified (74)

It is a prayer that recalls the text's desire to both summon the ghost and to banish him; the hauntological spectre of the Father forms the absent centre of the text, but Howe does not let him speak for her, merely *through* her, a kind of possession that works both ways. The prayer begins not by addressing or summoning a deity—the “Lord” has been displaced from this position as early as the epigraphic poem—but instead by speaking “In Authorem,” as the author. The feminized prayer then speaks either *to* or *as* the Father, but the bastardized syntax does not make clear which. The prayer boasts its desire to make manifest the presence of the speaker whose “words” will “justif[y]” her, but the double-meaning of “justify” ultimately betrays the stated goal of this prayer. Neither sanctioned by a larger structure (moral or governmental) nor filling the page from left to right margin, the prayer instead draws attention to the blank space that surrounds it, marking the separation between the speaking subject and the archaic authority of the Latin. The feminine thus functions, in Howe's poetic language, as the subversion that Cixous always maintained it would be: “She is a blank page / writing ghost writing” (68). The spectres that haunt *Eikon Basilike* are spectres that feminize the patriarchal structures, inserting a new writing subject into them. Exposing the absent centre of logos (of representation and its concomitant exegetical reading) leaves Howe space not only to critique these structures, but also to insert her complicated and multiple writing-self/ves into the poems.

Reading for Static, Nonsense, and Forkbombs

In the first essay proper included in *My Beloved Wager* (2009), “The Anti-Anæsthetic,”¹⁶ Mouré navigates the impossible and contradictory spaces of the writing self in poetry. I would like to spend a moment on this poetics piece—while, at times, dipping into other essays included in this collection—to discuss the difficult issue of authorship in *Pillage Laud*. While “The Anti-

¹⁶ While the version of the essay I use in this project is its appearance in *My Beloved Wager*, I want to point out that it did appear originally in *Open Letter* 9.3 (1995): 13-24.

Anæsthetic” does not deal directly with the computer-generation element of authorship that we see in this book, her comments therein on the structure of poetry are strikingly relevant to this discussion. In this essay, Mouré distinguishes between poetic “form” and poetic “structure,” two terms that frequently get conflated in poetic study (and this project is no exception). “Form” is a highly politicized category with a long history in poetry of reinforcing tradition and the status quo. Mouré is quite explicit about being interested in “[s]tructure, not form. And the social consequences of structure” (21). If “form” refers to the ways that a poem interacts with the tradition of formal organization—metre and rhyme, types, visuality and aurality—Mouré shifts her attention to “structure,” which refers to the materiality of the text and its organization without the markers of traditional expression, and thus traditional study. While the distinction may seem inconsequential at first, the move from “form” to “structure” offers her the opportunity to focus on issues of materiality that often get ignored or absorbed into formal study. “It’s materiality that interests me in writing poetry,” she writes, “words and the force of words, sounds, and signification, as well as the relation between the parts or particles, the interrelation of parts in the whole” (22). And throughout this essay, Mouré’s interest in materiality leads her to look at the gaps and fissures caused by materiality, wherein the physical elements of the text and its production reveal the incomplete nature of expression and of meaning. These “gaps” in expression “make the body present as a reader, and make it impossible to be satisfied with a surface that alleviates anxiety; the oh-what-a-beautiful-poem representation and effect” (27). This is to say that a reading that ignores materiality in favour of meaning also ignores the reading body in favour of the direct transmission of ideas and expression; this elision thus produces in the reader an “anæsthetic,” a reduction of the anxiety produced by the politicized structure of a poem. For Mouré, meaning and representation are the primary culprits of an anæsthetic reading.

For Mouré, as for the other authors in my project, meaning is inherently incomplete. As such, a complete and perfect meaning is impossible; “words,” she reminds us, “cannot entirely convey our desires” (22). But, poetry can work to bring to the fore the incomplete nature of meaning-making and meaning-reception through sound, through aurality, which is inherently tied for her with the concept of memory that I have discussed previously. Mouré writes that “[s]ounds unlock memories which precede the laws of social order. Sounds that precede words. The sound is where memory coalesces in the poem” (23). In some ways, this statement recalls the kind of logocentrism that Derrida attacks in *Disseminations*, the notion that speech or live memory precedes the graphic process, and thus suggests a truth outside of language but gestured toward with every articulation. Mouré navigates away from this dangerous logocentrism by instead suggesting that all attempts to convey meaning articulate not an external truth, a *logos*, but rather the fluctuating and incomplete desires of a nebulous speaking subject.

It may seem strange that a discussion of the authorial poetics of an ostensibly computer-generated text would lead Mouré, and by proxy myself, to a discussion of a speaking subject and his/her attempts at meaning-making. But, as Mouré asserts in “The Anti-Anæsthetic,” ignoring this facet of writing would be a misstep. “Of course,” she writes, “we can’t speak about sound without admitting the presence of the speaker, that socially constructed being who enacts it” (24). In this equation, Mouré aligns “sound” with Julia Kristeva’s “semiotic,” and the “sign” and its concomitant meaning-making as Kristeva’s “symbolic,” entering into the Law of the Father (*vis a vis* Lacan) (ibid). As we move the sign away from its immaterial meaning-making processes by foregrounding its materiality and altering its traditional usage, Mouré’s sound and the Kristevan semiotic enter the equation and ultimately disrupt this Law (25). When poetry attempts this practice, the reader can observe “a leak out of meaning and a folding back on

meaning, an excess, not a complexity of meanings but the way that new meaning occurs” (ibid). *Pillage Laud* brings this process to the fore, replacing the traditional speaking-subject with the cyborg author while at the same time retaining the dominant traditional grammatical structures of the sentence. The text reminds its reader that “*even the breakdown of the logos is buried in the logos*” (29), and we can never read or write either completely within or without these structures. The anti-anæsthetic is the “insensible” (ibid), and in *Pillage Laud* it is buried right into the structures that organize and guide anæsthetic meaning.¹⁷

Because *Pillage Laud* is a self-described¹⁸ book of lesbian sex poems, however, we cannot ignore the social structures that construct the speaking subject. While Mouré focuses in this essay on the materiality of the text and of the bodies that read and write it, she is also particularly sceptical of identity discourses, arguing that sexual desire (and, for her, especially feminized sexual desire) resists an identity discourse¹⁹ (28). The cyborg authorship of *Pillage Laud* is an attempt to articulate this desire incompletely; the merger of machine and flesh is itself an intercourse filled with desire and produced in flux.²⁰ In this way, the text neither relies on a

¹⁷ Comment Andy Weaver (3/7/14): “Do you (and/or Mouré) mean that this insensible is necessarily immanent in language? If so, does it function as a Lyotardian [honestly, I’ve done my best not to always bring him into the discussion!] unrepresentable sublime?”

¹⁸ Comment by Andy Weaver (3/7/14): “I don’t like ‘claim’ in the sentence ‘Because *Pillage Laud* claims to be a book of lesbian sex poems’—it suggests that you find an artifice or error in that statement (which is fine, if you intend to do that and then explain why—if you don’t intend that, I’d change that word).”

¹⁹ This discussion of sexual desire as moving beyond and against an identity discourse should recall Duncan’s arguments in “The Homosexual and Society” and my discussions of the essay in Chapter Two. The homosexual poetics of both authors may intersect in this way, but the difference between Duncan’s male homoerotic desire and Mouré’s lesbian sexual poetics is clearly gendered. While I do not have the space to do justice to this comparison here, I would suggest that the masculine nature of Duncan’s homosexual poetics allows him a more facile integration into tradition than we see in Mouré, though I would need more space and more research to discuss this properly.

²⁰ Mouré never claims to oppose or to embrace authorship; she is always explicit about her fraught relationship to it. As she writes in “My Relation to Theory and Gender,” “I don’t trust too easily the process of setting down, and being the author of, writing” (88).

clearly delineated speaking subject, nor does it attempt to completely refuse authorship. And this, for Mouré, is integral to the radical political potentials of the text. She goes on to write that:

If poetry just privileges the author's voice, without self-questioning, or if it tries to make the subject vanish, it fails to take into account this social and linguistic contradiction, ... and if it fails to take into account the dynamic between the mainstream and the marginal, it will fail to deal with how information is conveyed and fall into the Order created by the public, thus perpetuating it. (33)

In this way, Mouré encourages a poetics not of battling with or attempting to destroy the authorial voice or the presupposed identity of the speaking/writing subject, but rather what she calls a “cherishing” (34). A poetics of “cherishing” embraces an authorship in flux, encouraging a love that produces and is produced by the common (as proposed by Hardt and Negri) rather than an antagonism; it is self-questioning while always already acknowledging that sound must come from a socially-constructed speaking subject. While this process is of course possible outside of the computer-generated text, I would argue that the inclusion of machine writing and the digital²¹ elements of the produce of *Pillage Laud* makes it a prime example of this “cherishing” authorship made manifest. The confusion and incompleteness of meaning making is thus imbued right into the very materiality of the text and its production. As Mouré claims elsewhere, her work “is all about being hurtled or saddened, or a combination, trying to get some of the confusion about feeling into the material of the poem” (“My Relation to Theory and

²¹ I should add an important caveat to my discussions here and elsewhere about my understanding of *Pillage Laud* as a digitally-inflected text. While the text is not, as digital humanists would argue, “born-digital,” the digital elements of the production of this text are indeed integral to the reading of the piece. Without a basic understanding of computer-generation, and of Charles O. Hartman’s *MacProse* program, the text can neither be produced nor fully read. Something of it is lost when we ignore the machine involved in its production. While I do not have the space or time to discuss it here, there is significant precedent to read this text as “post-digital” poetics, as articulated by Florian Cramer in “Post-Digital Poetics,” published in the *Electronic Book Review*.

Gender” 87). The result is that we must read the author of *Pillage Laud*, cyborg though she is, as a text herself, written both on and by these larger structures that govern identity.

To read the author as a text is to admit our own complicity in the production and reception of socially constructed identities. As Mouré argues in another essay collected in *My Beloved Wager*, “we must admit complicity with the social structure, and this admission to me is to divulge and admit our stake” (“For Scoping Girls” 90). The way to admit our complicity in the social structure while at the same time putting conceptions of identity and self under scrutiny and into flux is by understanding the human body²² as containing code (and here I intend for “code” to read as it is used in *both* computer and social sciences), as physical reality that is read and translated into something readable by a larger sphere. “Bodies,” Mouré writes, “are coding devices” (91) from which otherwise insensibilities (for example, desire) are read and organized by way of Order, Law, and meaning making. The inclusion of the digital in the process of writing (and reading) makes it thus even more important to read the body as such. Mouré admits that “it is critical to consider the body not as self-enclosed and complete but as a coding practice” (94), and the cyborg authorship of *Pillage Laud* makes this coding twofold. As readers of the computer-generated text, we must then become interested primarily with words as the articulation of coding, “enacting a poetry that ... does not operate as representation but as designation—an *act* or coalescence—of being, that both counters the grain of power and recognizes ... its complicity with and in those structures” (95). *Pillage Laud* is at once the excess of meaning and the recognition of its inevitable complicity in the transmission of meaning from speaker to reader. This process is inescapable. *Pillage Laud* doesn’t care about the New Sentence, but more importantly (and, I would argue, more effectively) it cares about sneaking the

²² The argument could probably be made for the inclusion of non-human animal bodies in this discussion, though that is outside of my focus and my abilities at this juncture.

insensible into the Old Sentence. The computer-generated insensibility of the text functions as a fork bomb,²³ instigating a process of excess (excess of meaning, of desire, of selves) that repeats and folds in on itself until the larger structures start to give way.

Eikon Basilike is a similarly invasive text bent on the destruction of larger structures and frequently depicting this as violence within the text itself, a fact that the vast majority of the scholarship surrounding the text notes. And yet, scholars of Howe's work often use terms of pleasure or positivity, usually unqualified or in passing, to describe these moments of overwhelming. Consider, for example, Crown's note on Howe's work as "ecstasy" (488). While she does not pursue this line of argument, *Eikon* functions as ecstatic insofar as it works to move outside of or beyond the gridlines of a clearly delineated (literally in print as well as metaphorically) systems of logic, history, and legality. Dworkin also makes joking use of the term ecstasy in reference to her visual disruptions, arguing that "[w]ith an ear attuned to the pleasures of noise, Howe writes from out of the static; ex-static indeed" (47). Dworkin throws out "ex-static" almost unthinkingly, but I believe that the term is certainly worth pursuing in terms of Howe's work; "ex-static" becomes a way of designating the radical potentials of joyful movement, at once out of the static, the stasis of grid and structure, as well as a communication coming out of static, or noise.

²³ Comment by Andy Weaver (3/7/14): "um... what's a 'fork bomb'? [Remember, I'm old!]"

Addendum: In the simplest terms, a "fork bomb" is a virus in which a coding process continually causes itself to continually repeat and replicate itself in order to use up the memory and resources of the system causing it to slow down and, eventually, to crash. There are a number of different kinds of fork bomb processes depending on the coding system you are inserting it into (ie. HTML, Java, etc).

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Here the term “ecstasy” functions a lot like Mouré’s “cherishing” detailed above insofar as it is the joyful acceptance of the multiplicity and the desiring-flux of a newly destabilized authorship. It should also recall my use of the term earlier in my discussions of Mac Low wherein, for the poet, ecstasy, or *ekstasis*, functions primarily to transport both writer and reader, to move him or her beyond the typical confines of his or her identity. In this sense, we must begin a discussion of the ex-static in Howe as one grounded in the disruption of monadic identity. Crown gestures toward this in her use of “ecstatic” which she uses to signal Howe’s challenge to a linear view of history and its complicity with the supposed unity of the lyric subject (488). While she does not explicitly make this connection herself, Crown’s designation of Howe’s work as ecstatic is inherently tied to her analysis, a few pages later, of Howe’s language as a “stutter” (501), as in the expositional stuttering I discuss in Spahr. Both ecstasy and stutter function as the “anti-telos” of Howe’s work (486), which Crown foregrounds. But, Crown’s analysis asserts, at its core, that these moments of anti-telos, of stutter and ecstasy, function as inarticulation or noise that serve to overwhelm rhetoric with what she terms the somatic force of language (499). While the French feminists maintained the ecstatic or joyful aspects of a somatic linguistics, in *Eikon Basilike* this overwhelming somatic returns our gaze to the violence of colonialism, of regicide, and of the silencing of minor voices. There is something radical and important about aligning these forms of violence together. But, my work is interested in a politics of noise that is not particularly concerned with the body (linguistic or otherwise) and rather with something quite external to the physical. In this section I am primarily concerned with those moments when *Eikon Basilike* gets exstatic and moves away from these structures.

As Dworkin’s theorizations of poetic noise in Howe’s work tell us, while a poetics of noise is necessarily a poetics of disruption and of breaking-apart, it would be a misstep to

suggest that a poetics of noise is thus an attempt to mimetically reproduce these disruptions. Rather, a poetics of noise is primarily concerned with carrying out this disruption itself; noise poetry is a speech act. In Dworkin’s words, noise has the potential in and of itself to disrupt, and it is “[t]his potential to disrupt the message, to unsettle the code of the status quo [that]

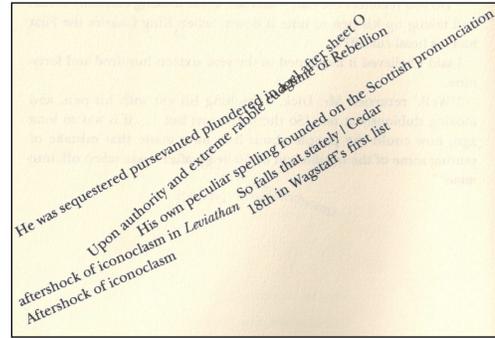


Figure 13
Susan Howe. From *Eikon Basilike. The Nonconformist's Memorial* (78).

makes noise more than simply the record of violence” (39). Rather than merely serving a communicative function, a poetics of “noise proliferates hand in hand with an increase in the terms of communication” (45). Treating noise as representative or communicative—that is, reading it as hermeneutics, as the scholarship surrounding Howe (my own work included) tends to—jeopardizes its disruptive potentials. Dworkin reminds us: “[e]ven critical scholarly work that pays close attention to the disruptive possibilities of visual prosody runs the risk of neutralizing the very disruptive potential it identifies” (49). By characterizing Howe’s noise poetics as “visual prosody,” Dworkin foregrounds the material and physical aspects of poetry. In recalling Crown’s emphasis on the somatic force of language, Dworkin’s interest (following Howe’s) in “poetry as a physical act” (31) tends to similarly limit the radical potentials of noise. That is, in arguing that her abuses of language echo the historical dangers and violences of language (38), ultimately confronting “the illusion of the transparency of the printed page” (41), Dworkin’s work reifies the static, grounding what is essentially ephemeral into the limitations of the material text. Even if through her own emphasis in her poetics (namely in the wildly popular and frequently discussed *My Emily Dickinson*) on the material conditions of the grapheme, “Howe reinvigorates a consideration of the material conditions of poetry” (43), the anti-telos of

Eikon Basilike, and the spectral remainders that permeate the text suggest that a good deal more is happening in the literal intersections of these lines than a foregrounding of physicality.

Certainly Dworkin makes an important point in his argument that “[t]he material text cannot ever completely escape from the republic of signification; it simply crosses the border from the canton of ‘literary’ to that of ‘visual’ art” (48). But, I cannot help but wonder if this line of argument does not simply follow Plato, ultimately denigrating the written word in the way that Derrida opposed. Here Bruns seems to speak my own oppositions to Dworkin without ever naming him explicitly. Bruns, too, associates Howe’s semantically nonsensical work with “noise” (36), but in so doing he maintains that we cannot focus too much on the “grid” and Howe’s visual disruptions of it because that would ignore the important aural elements of this disruption. Seemingly reversing the Platonic scepticism of the mimesis of the grapheme, Bruns positions the aural as anarchic where the visual is not. For this reason, he calls Howe’s work, her visual prosody, “anarchic sound-forms” (37-38). While Bruns’s focus in his article is on Howe’s later work, I would like to use this conception of the anarchic sound-form to illuminate the fact that in *Eikon Basilike* so many of the visual illegibilities are actually based on the intersection between aural and visual connections, rather than the clear focus on the visual that we see in scholarship of this text.

In this way, and not unlike my discussions of Mullen, I see Howe as working to collapse the unhelpful divide between the aural and the visual or written. *Eikon Basilike* presents its discontinuities as inextricably both aural and written, and I would argue that it is all the more radical for it. In fact, I would go as far as to argue that *Eikon Basilike* functions as a radical activist text most effectively in the moments where the aural and visual disruptions work together to expose different and multiple radical and political readings. In *Eikon Basilike*, Howe

uses this intersection as a point of activism, a point of “intervention” in the cognition and interpretation of its readers. “Intervention” is a term that Paul Naylor uses in his discussion of Howe (67), and that I used in my discussion of Duncan in Chapter Two. We can categorize Howe’s visual/aural interventions into three loose and necessarily interconnected categories: anti-regulatory, anti-assurance, and anti-logic (all inherently linked to the anti-telos that Crown signals in her discussion of iconoclasm). They all speak out of static, and intervene in stasis.

Anti-regulation

Howe’s work as anarchic is concerned, in so many ways, with a disruption of the regulatory potentials of language. Rather than simply imagining language as regulating

categorical or linguistic constructions, Howe’s work positions language’s regulatory function as upholding the larger oppressive structures of government and property. As Naylor observes, “regulating nature’s representation in language with the tools of grammar and spelling keeps the lines of ownership and mastery well defined and open to adjudication by the ‘European grid’ of property-rights law” (55-56). In *Eikon Basilike*, these anti-regulatory

interventions surface in the form of visual illegibilities or overlaps that work to dismantle the emblems of government and law. For example, on page fifty-four (see fig. 16) the words

“misapplying Law” in a vertical line intersect with “misprison” and a “now nonexistent dramatic

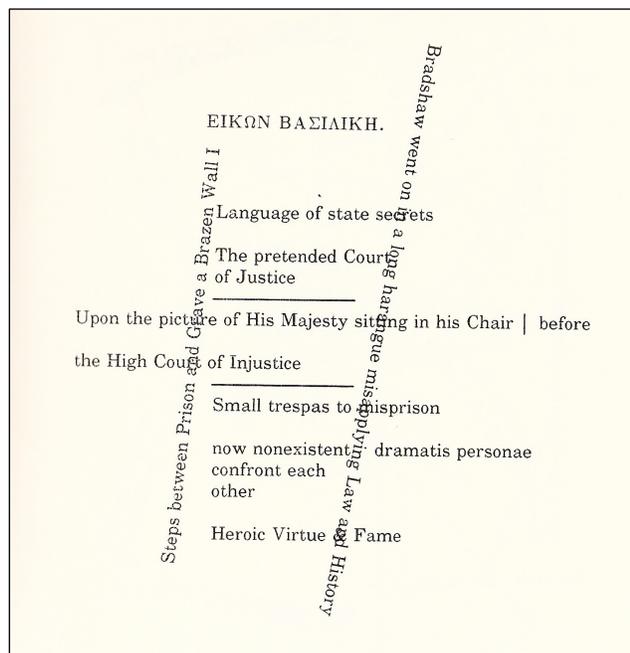


Figure 14
Susan Howe. From *Eikon Basilike. The Nonconformist's Memorial* (54).

personae.” Here, Howe identifies the potential for those in power to manipulate repressive state apparati (Law, prison) for the purpose of stifling opposition. But, in their intersection, the Law and the misapplication of it are brought together with a “dramatis personae,” the spectral actors in the scene of *Eikon Basilike*. As these two “confront each / other,” Howe’s illegibility brings to the fore the radical

potentials of language to counteract these abuses. A few pages later, the terms of the repressive state apparatus begin to disintegrate, as in the “step s” towards execution from the “p

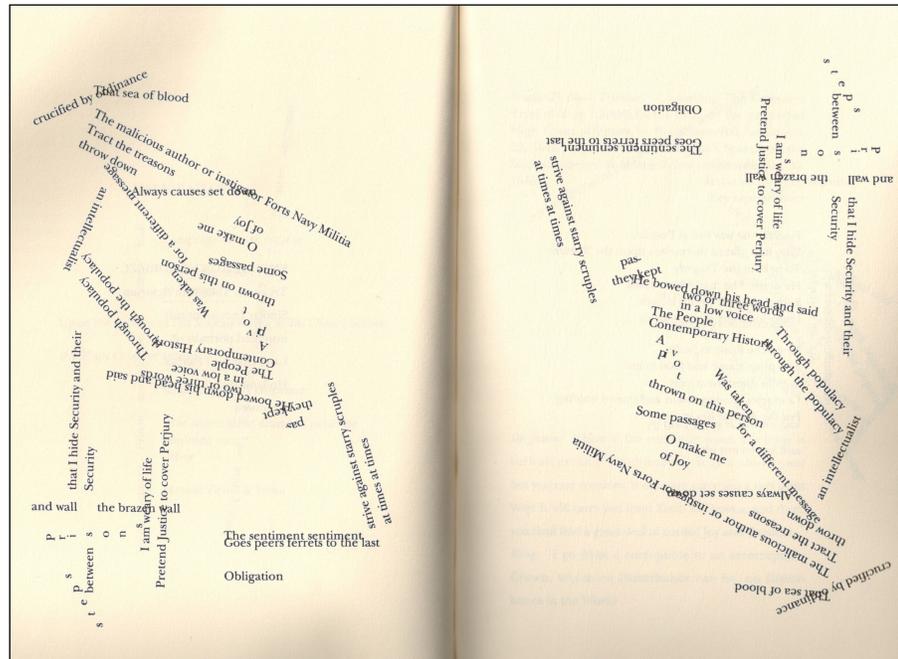


Figure 15
Susan Howe. From *Eikon Basilike. The Nonconformist's Memorial* (56-7).

rison s” in which the antigovernmental voice (here paradoxically²⁴ represented by Charles I) slowly falls apart (56/57). Appearing on two pages (see fig. 17) that are reversed versions of each other, Howe separates the letters of these terms to reveal the erasure carried out by each, and to encourage their confrontation. Both pages feature at their centre “A p i v o t” (56/57). Just above

²⁴ The paradox here is that Howe uses an extreme image of state power to represent its dismantling. As Charles I ascends the steps to his own execution, Howe exposes the fissures and hauntological vacancies within these terms. This paradox, rather than impeding her argument, actually strengthens it by demonstrating how quickly and easily the figures of government are altered, deposed, or repurposed, thus proving their arbitrariness.

this “pivot,” the lines “The People / Contemporary History” and “Through populacy / through the populacy” appear connected as if by a fulcrum. Here the typically regulated and recorded concept of “History” is destabilized slightly—turns on its pivot—by virtue of its new constitution *by* and *through* the people²⁵ rather than by monarchical/governmental powers. The fact that this visually disruptive poem is duplicated (albeit reversed) on both verso and recto also attests to the poems’ desire to expose the impossibility of an “original” text or a truthful/historical “documentation.” Later in the serial poem, when the visual disruptions become even more pronounced, these emblems of government repression and legality become even more illegible. On page seventy-three, the designations of illegality fall apart: upside-down and segmented, “a u l t e r e r” perhaps recalls “adulterer”; “P e r e r i a t i o n s” perhaps recalls “perpetrations.”²⁶ Both visually compromised and aurally disrupted, these terms contain only a trace of this state-sanctioned repression. They become exstatic in that they mean nothing in and of themselves, but their potentials for multiple, excessive meanings is opened up as the words themselves are made open by the dramatic kerning.

²⁵ It is also possible that these lines reference Howard Zinn’s interventionist historical project, *A People’s History of the United States* (1980), which gained popularity and ushered in a new popular and academic radicalism in the social sciences in the decade leading up to Howe’s publication of *Eikon Basilike*.

²⁶ Comment by Andy Weaver (26/3/14): “I think, though, that you might extend your suggestions further: ‘pereriations,’ to me, suggests ‘peregrinations,’ (the *OED* lists ‘pererration’ as an obsolete word with similar meaning) and possibly ‘perforations.’ Likewise, ‘aulterer’ suggests variations on ‘aul’ (‘all’) or ‘awl,’ as well as alterer/altarer (one who alters/altars). I just think that offering multiple suggestions for possible meanings maintains the destabilizing nature of Howe’s work, which you nicely emphasize in your discussion.”

The aural potentials are made manifold as the words are lengthened and the space for new and multiple sounds and meanings are provided. On page seventy-eight (see fig. 18), the “cudgel”—so often a symbol of self-defence or rebellion—obscures the “in a time²⁷ of Rebellion,” and suddenly the

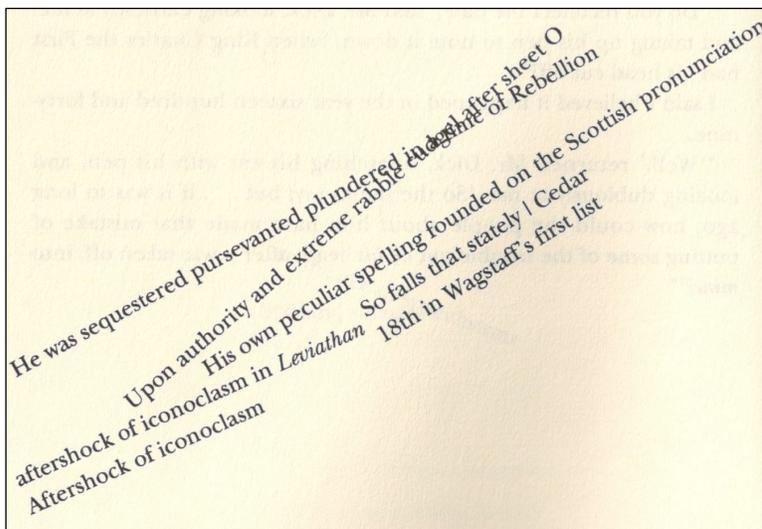


Figure 16
Susan Howe. From *Eikon Basilike. The Nonconformist's Memorial* (78).

repressive apparati of opposition are brought into question, too. The section becomes semantic nonsense or *noise*, as the “dg” of cudgel interferes with the “me” to recall both visually and aurally both “danger” and “dogma.” Rebellion, in its capitalization and its cudgelling violence, is rendered dogmatic, too, aligned with the grid-like regulation of the government and its regicide.

Anti-assurance

Naylor suggests throughout his chapter on Howe that her disruptions are all marked by a lack of what he terms “assurance” (61), or the comfort inherent in the encoding and decoding of a message received in Jakobsonian fashion. Assurance, in this case, is the mark of the unity of the lyric subject, the cohesion and trustworthiness of the lyric voice. Obviously, *Eikon Basilike* refuses to provide its readers with such a lyric, in Howe’s own words or in the words she

²⁷ While the 1989 original printing of *Eikon Basilike* makes clear the diagonal line reads “in a time of Rebellion,” this same passage in *The Nonconformist's Memorial* includes the poem in smaller print and the line looks distinctly like it could read as either “time” or “rime” of Rebellion. The visual noise of the page opens up a new reading here, linking the literature of Rebellion (“rime”) with its actual appearance (“time”), possibly arguing for the revolutionary potentials of the text, or of all text.

borrows. The complex of authorship is made manifest in some moments of illegibility when the assurance of the lyric voice is made impossible by the visual and aural complications of the text. One excellent example of this is on page fifty-eight (see fig. 19), wherein the already experimental conception (owing no small debt to

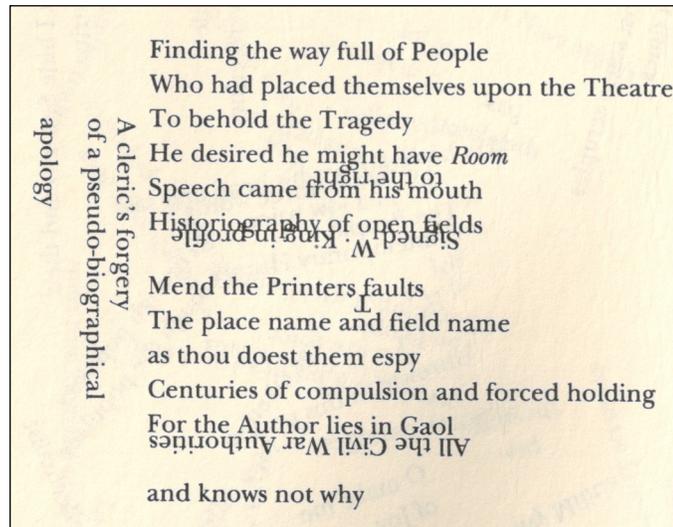


Figure 17
Susan Howe. From *Eikon Basilike. The Nonconformist's Memorial* (58).

the Black Mountain poets) of the “Historiography of open fields” is superimposed by the upside-down signature, “Signed King in profile.” The already half-faced (that is, profiled) King who supposedly authored the “original” text in question is further complicated through reversal and palimpsest. Even more puzzling is the inclusion of a capitalized “W” just above the upside-down line and a capitalized “T” above that, which this author makes no attempt to decipher. This inability to decipher is pre-empted by Howe, too, in the following page where the line, “An intellectualist out of levelling love” (59), is superimposed diagonally over a prose-like paragraph. So, the historical facts here are already unclear, like the “Tuesday Jan. 30” with the “H T writings” on top, made really illegible (59). But my desire as “intellectualist” to decipher the text is met with the levelling (or destabilizing) force of “love.” Love is excessive and exstatic; it literally levels or dismantles static structures as it produces illegible moments on the page. Toward the poem’s end, the lines “in the ace of speechstone / Spelling surname” (76) criss-cross

to remind us that this assurance is withheld as a result of an impossible monadic identity.²⁸ And just a page later the words “ithuriel intent” (77) are presented as connecting in an artificial centre by their “i”s. Howe not only foregrounds the artificiality of connecting an “author” with his or her “intent,” an old-hat observation by now, but she also suggests that authorial is really ethereal, the placing of the “I” into the ether. Without providing the assurance of authorship and intention, Howe destabilizes the reading process and thus opens it up to greater reader freedom.

Anti-logic

As she suggests herself throughout *Birth-Mark*, a collection of poetics essays, Howe’s project is one of “unsettling” history. As Naylor goes on to explain, “Howe’s poetry seeks out a different logic, a logic she believes has been repressed rather than assured by the centuries” (61). It is this anti-logic that Crown identifies in her stuttering, that Dworkin sees in her noise, and that Peter Nicholls sees in her “stammering” which he argues “keeps us on the verge of intelligibility, [where an] emphasis on sound is coupled with a habitual shattering of language into bits and pieces” (597). So, in the

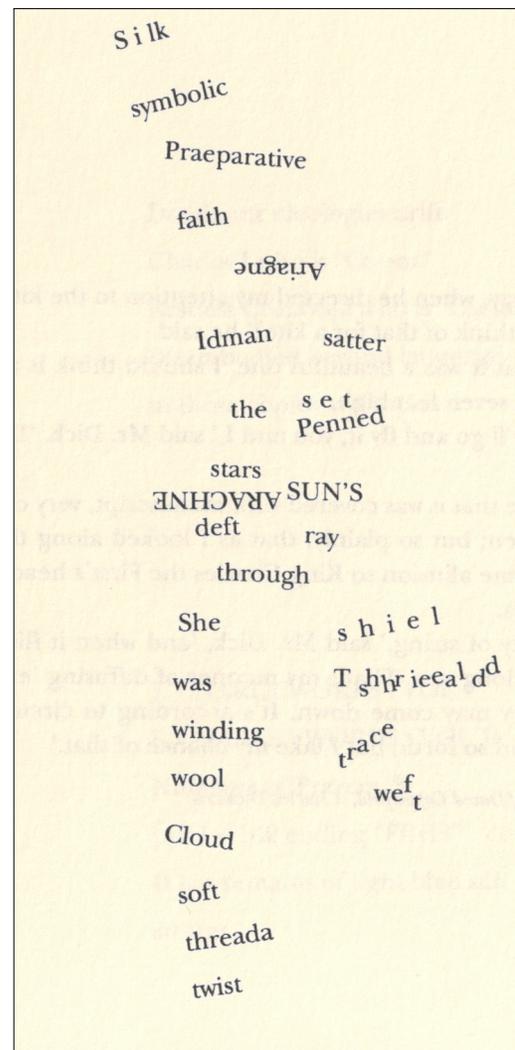


Figure 18
Susan Howe. From *Eikon Basilike. The Nonconformist's Memorial* (82).

²⁸ It should be noted that in *Eikon*'s original edition, these two crossed-over lines are given their own page to emphasize their importance. In *The Nonconformist's Memorial* they are relegated to the bottom of the page that comes before.

epigraphic poem I mentioned earlier, the word “beering” (already upside down) contains above it the letter “a” hovering over the second “e.” The word “beering” is an archaic term, according to the *OED*, for a buzzing, noisy sound (*birr*) as well as a contemporary colloquialism for consuming alcohol, especially socially. On the other hand, “bearing” suggests both a relevance or meaning (as in having or not having bearing on a case) *and* a movement or direction (as in a compass bearing). The meanings collide into one unpronounceable, unwritable word that refuses logical semantic inclusion. In its excess of meaning and its complicated aurality (how precisely does one read this page aloud?), this example too becomes exstatic in its illogic. This anti-logic is brought together with the themes of violence and authorship in the final page of the poem (see fig. 20), where a disassembled “s h i e l” instructs us to remove the “s h i e l d” from “T s h h r i e e a l d d” (a nonce “word” that I cannot help but read as “threshold”). Once the shield, the defensive posturing, is removed, we are left with “t h r e a d,” a recollection of the various images of Ariadne/ Arachne and the woven tale throughout. The poem risks disconnecting completely at its close: “t r a c e” works its disassembled way upwards, “w e f t” barely holds on in the bottom-right corner. The “bearing” that is signalled in the epigraph is disintegrated by the poem’s end, and we are left instead with the anti-logic of trace and weft, the spectral presence of meaning, the ecstasy of static noise between (and superimposed over) the lines of the grid.

BEhold Mimesis: Queer Bodies and Concrete Poems

As with many feminist embodiment projects, the text is clearly aligned in *Pillage Laud* with the (eroticized, female) body. The examples are plentiful, and I open this section with a few that draw this parallel most clearly. For the most part, the text seems to suggest that the poems embody the lover’s body (the lyric beloved, but also a common readership connected through the affinitive process of reading). For example, the text reads “you are certain letters” (43), or a page

later “You were these comments” (44), and perhaps most strikingly, “where did you leave the pen I last wrote you with” (98).²⁹ Occasionally, the spectral presence of the author or speaker is aligned with language, as on page eighty-one where the text reads: “I was a canvas speaking for the likely word.” Other times, this relationship gets more complicated, as when the text reminds its readers that there is obviously a separation between body and text: “How shall the page sleep? / Your voice was another theorem” (66). Regardless, the text repeatedly asserts that the materiality of language, and its inherent relationship to the physical bodies involved in its production and reception, are integral to the piece as a whole. “The tool of paper,” it reminds us, “is the milligram, and pursues the tale” (70). Canadian feminist poetics has a long history of insisting on embodiment, on the relationship between language’s materiality and the female body; Phyllis Webb, Daphne Marlatt, Lola Lemire Tostevin, and even Margaret Atwood, have led this charge. Mouré expands upon the works of these other authors through her poetry’s relationship to the body and the way that it has been silenced. If I have suggested a complicity with this silence by quoting Mouré’s statement that her “mothertongue is silence,” I should like here to remedy that misconception. After all, Mouré famously writes in “Poetry, Memory and the Polis” that “a poetic silence, however lyric, however utopic, is a complicity with the existing order” (206). She asserts that the feminist poet must write against that silence.

In the same essay, Mouré argues that the position of the feminist poet is a difficult one, as the desire to write one’s difference is fraught with the complication that difference necessarily contains within itself the sameness it opposes (203). She tells Bronwen Wallace that her primary

²⁹ I would like to note that from the first edition to the BookThug edition of *Pillage Laud*, a line break is added following this line, adding further emphasis. While I cannot even try to answer this question now, the change between editions makes me wonder: how or why has embodiment and the erotic materiality of the text become more significant between these two editions? what has changed in the world of digital or technologically produced texts that suggested that this line needed further emphasis?

interest is in “women searching to inscribe themselves in language, in text, in history” (10). Though she later concedes to Wallace that, as Lacan famously asserted, the symbolic order is phallically based (that is, rooted in the Law of the Father) (41), language can approach the articulation of a feminized eroticism through the diffuse (44). She suggests what is likely irreconcilable: the embodiment of the diffuse, which is to say that if something is diffuse (and thus fluctuating and unstable) it is difficult to conceive of it as embodied or stabilized. To avoid making this erotic stabilized, Mouré embodies desire itself rather than the objectively figured female body, and includes the computer as the third term between author and text. The computerized element of *Pillage Laud* queers the book and helps to articulate a diffuse, erotic female body.

For Rachel Zolf, *Pillage Laud*'s computer-generated embodiment is inherently queer, not just because these are “lesbian sex poems,” but also because the incorporation of the computer into the eroticism of the text is a queering. In her article on *Pillage Laud*'s queerness, she points out that the computer's presence is not a gender-neutral one, noting that “‘Erín’ changed all the spat-out generic ‘he’s’ to ‘she’s,’ interrupting the engine’s patriarchal inclinations via a few short keystrokes” (234). This is just one example of the ways in which the collaboration between femininity and the machine is made queer for Zolf, and though I do not have the space to pay enough attention to her wild and thoughtful reading of the text, I think her conclusion is just as valid for my own work. Zolf insists that the perversion of *Pillage Laud* extends to the processes of meaning, logic, and subjectivity, and that “we can’t, and don’t want to, repair the gaps in presence and meaning and certainty and identity and authorship and testimony and archive and confession in and among these happily perverted pillaged lauds” (240). Here, Zolf reconciles Mouré’s interest in making displacement of minor or oppressed voices visible while at the same

time allowing space for silences in the text. In many ways, the digital elements of this text provide Mouré with a unique opportunity to carry out this perversion, representing—intentionally inadequately and incompletely—the diffuse nature of feminine erotic desire.

In *My Beloved Wager*, Mouré deals specifically with the ways that technology has integrated itself with the body, as erotic and as otherwise. “In this age,” she writes, “we as bodies, as coding devices, also extend over virtual spaces. Which is to say that, with computers and digital processing, any locality, including a body, is extensible over and through what we know as the old boundaries of physical space” (“Person, Citizen” 153-4). She suggests that the integration of technology into our lives extends the body to the point that she wonders if it can realistically be considered a closed, purely physical entity any longer. She asks:

Does the skin still demarcate the borders of identity when we work with a computer, when we no longer see our interlocutors? What is the effect of distance on the human body, on a woman’s body, on relations between women? Is distance also an inevitable effect, thus a fact of the text? In what ways does the text act like a skin? (“A Frame” 104)

Although she is referring to another of her collections, *A Frame of the Book*, Mouré’s attention to the technologized female body cannot be overlooked. The sexualized female body in *A Frame of the Book* bears some resemblance to the fragmented, eroticized body that appears throughout the pages of *Pillage Laud*.³⁰ She concedes that the sexualized body is a primary feature of her work, even if nearly twenty years ago she told Wallace that this was not an entirely effective feminist practice. She instead asserts: “I do write from a sexual and sexualized body, and it is from this

³⁰ In *A Frame of the Book*, the erotic female body is presented as diffuse. Though written-upon by the coding structures of language, the body always finds a way to present itself as diffuse and desiring by poking through the fissures and fragments of Mouré’s incomplete and excessive meaning-making, most famously in the long poem “The Wittgenstein Letters to Mel Gibson’s *Braveheart* (skirting her a subject) (or *girls girls girls*).”

body that I receive the world” (“Speaking” 97). But, this body avoids the pitfalls of a Cixousian *écriture féminine* because, as Mouré herself notes, it is presented as diffuse by way of the Spinozan concept of the body. Spinoza, Mouré tells us,

defines a body in two ways, which work in simultaneity: first, as composed of particles, an infinite number of particles in motion or at rest, thus defined not by forms but by velocities; second, as a capacity for affecting or being affected by other bodies, so that part of a body’s it-ness is its relationality. (ibid)

The body thus defined, language’s relationship to this body, which is made excessively diffuse by its incorporation with technology via its computer generation, is rendered postanarchist, diffuse and porous, defined by its affective relationships in the common.

It is through this understanding of the body that I must read the eroticized feminine imagery throughout the text, and in particular the image of the vulva that appears repeatedly throughout. In some cases, the vulva is aligned with the text, as is the case with its first appearance in the line “So arbitrary a vulva” (15). In other cases, the vulva is represented as a stand-in for the writing subject who is made diffuse and complicated by the computer-generation of the text. This is the case on page forty-six when the text reads, “When vulva typed this, she sprung at you.” The appearance of the vulva that I am most interested in appears on page sixty-eight, when the text reads “Don’t violas count as vulva zombies?” In this case, the truly diffuse nature of the eroticized female body is made clear. The aural and visual similarities of “vulva” and “viola” are brought to the fore, immediately recalling the tradition of the eroticized female body as an object either represented by art or as a source of inspiration for it (but never as a productive or creative element of it). But, this time the relationship is reversed, as Mouré asks if the art (in this case music) is valid as a kind of female sexuality rather than the other way around.

And none of this deals with the surprise appearance of the term “zombie,” a jarring inclusion in the text’s lexicon. The vulva zombie is the feminist cyborg writer par excellence, wherein the zombie is the perfect irreducible merger of the machine and the biological.³¹ *Pillage Laud* thus writes against the Law of the Father, embracing the diffuse potentials of signification to queer the existing structures. The vulva zombie is, in many ways, the ultimate form of this queering.

Eikon Basilike is also concerned with issues of embodiment, though not in the erotic or sexualized manner that we see in Mouré. I would like to look at embodiment in Howe’s text because, while this issue has by no means been critically ignored, it has typically been approached as an issue of the materiality of the text. While nearly every critical study of *Eikon Basilike* over the last decade or so has pointed to materiality and the visual as blind spots in the scholarship, I have difficulty finding criticism on this text that does not look to, or focus on, these issues. What follows is a brief study of the literature surrounding Howe’s engagement with print materiality and a poetics of embodiment. I hope to divert the critical attention away from its preoccupation with mimicry and historical violence and towards an understanding of Howe’s work in *Eikon Basilike* as drawing from concrete poetry. In particular, I wonder if reading this long poem as walking the line between lyric and concrete “constellation” (the seminal concrete poet Eugen Gomringer’s term for concrete poetry’s deviation from the traditional “line” of poetry) may help to reveal its radical postanarchist potentials.

Before I get into the issues of reading Howe as a kind of concrete poet, I want to look at how materiality, the visual, and textual embodiment are typically discussed in the scholarship surrounding *Eikon Basilike*. To begin, many articles, like the aforementioned one by Bloomfield,

³¹ For more on the zombie as a new, radical version of Haraway’s cyborg, see Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry’s “A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism.” *boundary 2* 35.1 (Spring 2008): 85-108.

treat this long poem as at once icon and iconoclasm. For Bloomfield, the text functions in its digressions from typical lineation as a visual mimicry of real, lived violence *as well as* textual violence. She consistently employs the language of mimesis in her discussion, arguing at one point that “the disrupted page echoes or even mimics historical violence” (418) that foregrounds “the haunting power of the icon” (424). For Bloomfield, there is an implicit link between iconoclasm and violence. That is, iconoclasm’s violence against the icon necessarily enacts a violence against the represented object, a violence that both Howe and Bloomfield connect to a politic of colonialism and othering (426). Bloomfield points to those moments in *Eikon Basilike* where violence is visually or pictorially gestured toward: the disruption of the image of the throne on page fifty four, for example, or the staggered reproduction of the steps to the guillotine on page fifty-nine. Additionally, Bloomfield likens the toppling “O lord” in the epigraphic poem as a tilt that mimics both prayer *and* decapitation (428). She also understands, if she does not explicitly state it, that Howe’s work functions in a much more complex way than simple pictorial mimicry; instead, the text literally embodies dispersal and discontinuity rather than merely representing or expressing it. This is what Bloomfield gestures toward when she attributes a kind of “agency” to the “specific shapes and arrangements” on the page that act upon the reader (422).

Many other critics in their discussions of mimicry and violence similarly employ the rhetoric of embodiment in their discussions of what they conclude is representational or pictorial. In her discussion of the eye-witness in *Eikon Basilike* as visual, Crown gestures towards a reading of eye-witness as embodiment (500), arguing even that in linking iconoclasm to historical and colonial violence, Howe “absorb[s] the rhetorical violence of iconoclasm into her poem” (497). Uta Gossman, in her study of Howe and textual memory, argues that the visual discord of the poem mimics violence as well, but uses a metaphor of theatricality to gesture

towards Howe's radical materiality. She writes that "Howe designates *Eikon Basilike* ... as a dramatic poem with voices moving on the stage of the page. In *Eikon Basilike*, the typography is meant to express visually the violence of King Charles I's death as well as the theatrical aspects of his execution" (98). While none of these critics directly address radical poetic embodiment, all of them understand quite clearly that Howe's refusal to dematerialize text, her reorienting of the telos of language, is a political (and explicitly gendered) act of historical rewriting.

Understanding Howe's work, and *Eikon Basilike* in particular, as a process of rewriting or overwriting has become *du rigueur* in the criticism, emblemized by Michael Davidson's designation of her work as "palimpsest." The readings of Howe as rewriting tend to fall into two related camps: historical rewritings of authority, and gendered rewritings of history. In the former, Perloff has led the charge, arguing that Howe's texts work not *against* history and tradition, but rather in what she terms "collusion" with them. For Perloff, this rewriting is both metaphorical and literal, arguing that through a complex interplay of embodiment and abstraction, Howe's collusion with history leaves the text "wounded" (530). In the latter, the most cohesive study of gendered rewriting and its intersection with materiality is Alan Golding's contribution to *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics* in which he argues that "Howe's poetics associates the feminine with rupture, gaps, erasure, absence—visually with various forms of fragmented text or 'empty' space" (159). The criticism surrounding Howe has been particularly interested in these gaps and absences. But, it would seem that an interest in absence *and* materiality is a contradiction. Thus, Golding appends this argument with the important caveat that while concerned with absence and erasure, "Howe constructs her 'feminine [and feminist] accomplishment' in and out of far from empty space" (164). What both Perloff and Golding insist in their reading is that Howe's interest

in the dispersal of otherwise coherent textual elements requires rethinking the reading process. In Howe's 'words,' our criticism needs "A p i v o t" (56/7). In order to rethink these overwritings and absences, we need to turn our interests from erasure and towards what fills these spaces.

For Elisabeth Joyce in "*The Small Space of a Pause*": *Susan Howe's Poetry and the Spaces Between*, the primary concern of Howe's work is absence, the spectral centres from which her writing reconsiders dominant structures. But, Joyce also insists that we also look to the materiality of print and the visual elements of the page in order to rethink Howe's textual organization. Gesturing towards a poetics of embodiment, Joyce argues that "[t]here are moments in Howe's poetry where letters become so divorced from their word groupings that they begin to be only letters" (116). As in the "p i v o t" quoted above, this interest in letters as "only letters" surfaces quite clearly in *Eikon Basilike*. It is this interest in the materiality of language that concerns Dworkin, too, who acknowledges that Howe herself is always primarily interested in "poetry as a physical act" (31). Dworkin concedes that letters as functions of a larger linguistic structure cannot escape the processes of representation and expression that govern language. Nonetheless, he asserts that regarding poetry as a physical act allows us to reconfigure our manner of reading, focusing our attention on the visual and the material over the communicative. "The material text," as he writes and as I have quoted previously, "cannot ever completely escape from the republic of signification; it simply crosses the border from the canton of 'literary' to that of 'visual' art" (48). Dworkin's analysis recalls some of the first concrete poets who similarly worked to distance material language from its signifying function. Dworkin does argue that "Howe's writing is generally not ... shaped, pictorial, or even schematic" and is therefore "more rich and sophisticated than most concrete poetry" (34), but I maintain that a close look at the mandates of the early concrete poets can enrich our readings of Howe's

materiality, allowing us to rethink textual embodiment in Howe in a way that avoids the pitfalls of a language of representation, mimicry, and icon.

To start understanding *Eikon Basilike* as working through a tradition of concrete poetry and unexpressive (or uninterested in expression) embodiment, I turn first to Gomringer who, in his poetics manifesto “From Line to Constellation” (1954), positions the constellation as a poetic form that allows distinction from traditional horizontal lineation without constantly functioning in opposition to it. “The constellation,” he writes, “is the simplest possible kind of configuration in poetry which has for its basic unit the word, it encloses a group of words as if it were drawing stars together to form a cluster” (67). The rhetoric of embodiment here is clear. For Gomringer, the constellation is a new physical creation rather than a mimetic representation of an external reality. As he goes on to say, “[i]n the constellation something is brought into the word. It is a reality in itself and not a poem about something or other. The constellation is an invitation” (67). In this sense, the concrete poem is fashioned as an object in and of itself, valued for its own entity. This feature of the concrete poem would become the most discernible and lasting element of concrete poetics, as found in the following often-quoted segment of August de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Decio Pignatari’s “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry” (1953):

Concrete poetry: total responsibility before language. Thorough realism. Against a poetry of expression, subjective and hedonistic. To create precise problems and to solve them in terms of sensible language. A general art of the word. The poem-product: useful object. (72)

The poem-product as useful object makes the speaker (an authorial persona) irrelevant, which necessarily distances this voice from the material writing process. In *Eikon Basilike*, this sentiment is solidified in the small concrete fragment that begins the final page (see fig. 20): “S i

lk” (82), where the materiality of the text, represented here by “silk”—the material product of Ariadne’s art—is ruptured by the lyric “I,” only to have the lyric subject’s appearance seem disconnected. The “I” is irrelevant to the silk, which continues its weaving uninterested with subjectivity entirely.³²

The constellation in Howe’s work, then, is a broken materiality, a series of connections that cannot and will not form into a tapestry, a coherent whole. This is what Back, in *Led By Language*, insists. She writes that “the materiality ... of that being broken—whether Howe’s *Eikon Basilike* or Charles I’s *Eikon Basilike*—is brought to the fore, examined, and charged with meaning” (123). While the vast majority of criticism gets distracted by the representational potentials (and thus critical goldmines) of a “theme of verbal violence” (142), Back is also concerned with the fact that the materiality of print allows for new and unique, and in my view more powerful, affective connections with the reader. Back writes that “Howe extends the concerns of the bibliographer by not only describing the material object created by print [but] also by considering print’s manipulation of the reader’s attitude toward that material object” (130). In *Eikon Basilike*, Howe uses a foregrounding of the materiality of language, and a poetics of embodiment, in order to encourage an active reader engagement with her text, turning away finally from the “Lost power of expression / last power of expression” (*Eikon* 63). She does this in the occasionally pithy way, as in her literal separation via enjambment of the “Nar- /” on one line

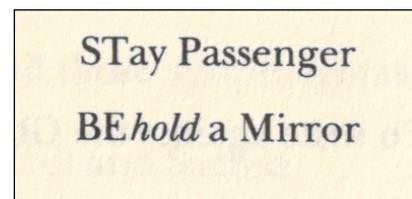


Figure 19
Susan Howe. From *Eikon Basilike*.
The Nonconformist’s Memorial (62).

³² Comment by Andy Weaver (9/4/14): “I was just reading the reissue of Emmett Williams’s *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, and I was struck by just how often the early concrete poets foregrounded the notion of the reader as a co-producer of the text (they really did establish that idea well before the Language writers). That might be something to mention in this plateau?”

and the “rative” on the next (67). But, this process is typically carried out in beautiful and nuanced concrete poems interspersed throughout the text. The most intriguing of these, for my purposes, is “*BEhold* a mirror” (62), a moment in which the reader’s engagement with the text, and his or her inevitable search for lyric voice and expression, is foiled by the text’s insistence on being read as a useful, material object. The point-of-view of “behold” is disrupted by the shift from capitalization to italicization, rendering the mirror’s reflection immediately fragmented: we cannot expect to see ourselves clearly or cleanly in this text. Instead, the reader is commanded to both exist as and embrace the text’s inability to encompass a point-of-view, or a subjectivity for that matter. At once external to us and ontologically part of us, the text refuses its position as “mirror,” as mimesis, as representation. In its refusal to cohere even on the level of one word’s typography, *Eikon Basilike* insists that its rewriting is always already rereading, rethinking, and most importantly repositioning.³³ In this way the text contains more elements of concrete poetry than Dworkin might have us believe.

While the embodiment projects of Howe and Mouré here differ greatly in terms of their content and, to and extent, their politics, reading them side-by-side illuminates the fact that what they critique in these projects is the same. Both poets use the materiality of their texts and their attempts to embody what they could not represent to shed light on the inadequacies and the potential dangers of assuming the possibility of complete representation. They thus present us with the incomplete nature of a postanarchist embodiment poetics, one that seeks to embody incompletely, allowing the text to contain and foreground within it the diffuse and partial nature

³³ Comment by Andy Weaver (9/4/14): “Your reading of the ‘BEhold a Mirror’ page is really suggestive—but might it go even further? There seems to be a tension between passivity (STay) and action (passenger) which is, in a sense, unresolvable if we imagine a command to ‘stay put’ and ‘remain a passenger’ (though, in a sense, isn’t that what readers do?), as well as a similar tension between ‘BE’ and ‘hold’ (as well as the command to ‘hold a mirror’—though, as you perceptively suggest, that mirror reflects brokenly). Or does such an exegetical reading work against your argument in favour of Howe’s text as concrete?”

of all signification, but especially the signification of desire, of subjectivity, and of the feminine. While Mouré's text is not concrete, and while Howe's text is not really erotic, what these texts share is not their methods but rather the larger structures they work against. Neither purports to get away from the "republic of signification" that Dworkin discusses. Instead, they both use the incomplete nature of their own embodiment poetics to bring to the fore the incomplete nature of all signification, of all representation, making these projects manifestations of the postanarchist critique of representation.

"To march is writing": Anarchism and Resistance

In light of these discussions of readership, authorship, and anti-archive, I should at this juncture spend some time discussing the role of politics proper and, for the sake of this project, of anarchism, in *Pillage Laud*. The text is at once clearly politicized—by virtue of the necessarily antitraditional positioning of the texts as lesbian sex poems notwithstanding the indeterminacy of their production—and apolitical due to the lack of a clearly defined voice speaking. If we read the text as the enactment of or enunciation of a speaking self through the fact that a text was produced in the first place, then we must also look at the politics of the relationship between an author produced by the text and his/ her audience. That relationship is anarchist in nature, not because there is no power exerted over individuals in the process of reading and writing this text, but because the power is reciprocal. In its reversal of the typical linear power relations between reader and writer, it produces a new way of approaching the political poem that is postanarchist in nature, and that relies heavily on the technological aspects of its production.

While *Pillage Laud* is not explicitly a digital text, we can still read its technological elements in light of the theories of reading hypertext that have, it would seem, gone out of vogue

since the rise of digital humanities. To do so, I return to the work of Michael Joyce and his discussion of the various forms of hypertext. Earlier I positioned *Pillage Laud* alongside Joyce's conception of the exploratory hypertext, but on further consideration, I would like to instead (or perhaps *also*) read these poems as a form of constructive hypertext as Joyce also discusses. The constructive hypertext is marked as slightly different from the exploratory hypertext insofar as it is acutely aware of its readership and is thus unique in its relationship to its audience. Joyce argues that in light of this unique relationship to the reader who physically engages with and changes the text, the constructive hypertext can and should be read as politically salient if positioned as a series of encounters (par. 24). The constructive hypertext functions, much like Mac Low's asemantic work, as a way of enabling the readers to become politically engaged by way of identifying the ways in which their choices are made for them through the acts of making decisions that would otherwise be made for them in their reading practices. The experimental, constructive hypertext helps its readers to identify the force of the ideological state apparatus (par. 26). This, Joyce concludes, is a primary factor in the development of a community, of communal readership. Central to this politics is a politic of witness, regarding which Joyce cites Mouré herself who, in her acclaimed collection of poetry *WSW*, positions a politics of witness against a bourgeois politics of nonengagement (par. 29-30). For Joyce, Mouré's politics in *WSW* (one of her more traditional collections, though no less interesting or engaging for that), is one that encourages reader engagement, ultimately producing readers who are more critical and more inclined to draw attention to, or at best to work to complicate, the forms of power exerted over them in the form of limiting their ability to freely choose.

Mouré herself is not an explicitly politically-identified author, but in her work there are traces of anarchism and revolutionary thinking, which at times surface almost explicitly. For

example, in her aforementioned correspondence with Wallace, she calls her own writing “anarchic conspiring” (14). Later, she implies that this anarchism has its roots in a politics of witness, though Mouré’s witness is not that of trauma (as we saw in Spahr) or political indifference (as we saw in Levertov). Instead, Mouré encourages a politics of witnessing language itself, and looking critically and carefully at the ways in which phallogocentrism functions on the level of meaning-making itself. She tells Wallace that “looking at language ... is a revolutionary or subversive act. Looking at how language produces meaning, and how that means that just changing ... is just replacing the status quo, being *used* by convention” (19, *emph. Mouré’s*). *Pillage Laud* marks what is perhaps her most concentrated look at language and its production of meaning. Her retention of the grammar of traditional English, the misuse of the words themselves, and the freeplay of the semantic meaning highlight the ways in which language functions through limitation, organizing words through grammar and syntax, and subsequently limiting our options in both reading and writing through the process of meaning making on the level of the words themselves, on the level of signification. The goal, however, is not to produce a text that is activist in nature, or to produce a text in which a writer encodes an activist message that the reader must decode and receive. Instead, as Rudy notes in her excessive reading, the function of such close-ups on the production of meaning is not to make poetry activism, but to make poetry that disgruntles its readers (angers them, frustrates them, disorganizes them), allowing *them* to initiate social change (213). *Pillage Laud* is not activism; it produces activism; it produces activists.³⁴ This may read as prescriptive at first, but the important

³⁴ Comment by Andy Weaver (3/6/14): “An honest question: are these two statements compatible, or are they contradictory: ‘we must also look at the politics of the relationship between an author produced by the text and his/her audience. That relationship is, I would like to argue, necessarily anarchist in nature, not because there is no power exerted over individuals in the process of reading and writing this text, but because the power is reciprocal’; and, later: ‘*Pillage Laud* is not activism; it produces activism; it produces activists.’ I’m sympathetic to both

thing here is that *Pillage Laud* does not have a positive politics *per se*, only a negative one. It critiques, notes inadequacies, and then steps back, allowing the reader to become the activist by virtue of signalling problems rather than providing solutions. Like Mac Low's analogies of free communities, Mouré's text functions as an analogy of activism, encouraging readers to draw parallels between the text and their own lives and encouraging them to become active both within and external to the text.

We can unite Mouré's politics with Joyce's described above by understanding the reading of computer-generated text as an act of translation. That is, the politics of both authors is demonstrated clearly in reading the relationship between *Pillage Laud* and its audience as one in which the reader translates the nonsensical, technologically-produced text into a language that is meaningful to him/ her. Mouré is no stranger to the process of translation; she not only writes in a number of languages (English, French, Portuguese, Galician), but she is also an acclaimed translator of poetry. She discusses the politics and practice of translation candidly and often, but it is an early discussion of translation with Chris Daniels, "An Exchange on Translation," that interests me most as it positions the translation of a text as a kind of activism. In this exchange, Daniels explicitly addresses the politics of translation, arguing that at its core, "[p]olitics is the art of wielding and managing power over others," and that in the act of translation, "I exert considerable power" (177). But, rather than seeing this exertion of power as exclusively harmful or negative, Daniels argues that it is possible to consider translation "an act of friendship" that is political in that it forces the translator to recognize other voices, and thus "fights cultural narcissism" (178). Mouré responds in agreement, arguing that the act of translation is central to the disruption of the monadic self. She argues that in translation you "gain the loss of self"

statements, but I wonder if that second statement is too prescriptive/categorical to allow for the postanarchist freedom of possibility you so nicely argue for? Or have I misconstrued your argument?"

(182).³⁵ In the multiplicity of voices produced by translation, we observe “our subjectivity shifting” (ibid).

Pillage Laud positions this shifting as a kind of activism enacted external to the text by the reader. The text produces the communal, where the common is productive in its rejection of logocentrism and its embracing of the nonsensical and the affective. Very early in the text, Mouré implicates the speaking subject (whomever that may be) in this common, too, writing “we are these emotions, we are those errors, and we contribute” (14). The text seeks to produce this common, but in its error-ridden, indeterminate nature, it refuses the utopian connotations of an anarchic common, instead questioning “Do utopias complete those treatments?” (83). The text is a resistance that comes not in the form of imagining a more free society—and not even in the production of an analogy of a more free society—but rather a suggestion of how we may draw attention to those places in which our freedom is limited by phallogocentrism and its reliance on representation and signification. For Mouré as anarchist author of *Pillage Laud*, “[t]exts were methods” (66) of both resistance and experimentation rather than sublime visions of another, freer world. “To march,” she insists, “is writing” (56). In this way, the activism of Mouré’s work is a more pragmatic and less idealistic manifestation of the TAZ. Rather than occupying the fissures of power in temporary bursts of freedom, *Pillage Laud* will not avert its gaze from power itself. For all its emphasis on pleasure, the book insists on continuing the “treatment” of the problem rather than the dream of a utopian goal.

Additionally, the text is repeatedly antirepresentational in the form of being antidemocratic insofar as democracy is inherently representation (it produces a government that

³⁵ Mouré is referencing the work of Robert Majzels, the acclaimed Canadian novelist and translator, with whom she shared a Governor General Award nomination for their translation of Nicole Brossard’s *Cahier de roses et de civilization* in 2008.

“represents” its people). Democracy is positioned as a form of government that produces stalled and static subjectivities. For example, on page thirty-seven she writes that “Every democracy / appeared to distribute someone, and you were / the diameter of shale” (37). Representational democracy thus produces the subject as shale, as stone; though shale as a sedimentary rock is necessarily multiple in and of itself, the modifier of “diameter” rejects the radical potentials of the stone here. Instead, the diameter of shale is perfectly circular and always already measured, a static piece of rock produced by a form of government that would speak for rather than of its subjects.³⁶ Later, this conception of democracy as stasis recurs in the line “[t]o stop aids democracy” (94). Instead, a print-mark made to look like a hand-written “A” (see fig. 22) appears in the margins of page one hundred of the original printing,³⁷ suggesting an anarchism just outside of the representation inherent in language, but complicated by the computer-generation of the text. In this way, the text itself is positioned as a method of resistance, and one that works to aid in and to expand the existing resistance movements.³⁸ In postanarchist fashion,

³⁶ Comment by Kate Siklosi (27/5/14): “In terms of the shale reference, I think it is compelling in terms of its connection between the ‘frailty’ of democracy and the structure of shale itself. According to my geological research, since shale is highly stratified using mud and sometimes clay, it results in very weak structural integrity, which allows it to be broken into individual pieces quite easily. It is also formed from the material of mud and sometimes clay, temporary materials that are pliable yet soft, and can be ‘washed’ away easily, which opposes the lasting presence of ‘stone’ as you mention. All this being said, I find Mouré’s use of shale here quite apt—shale is a conglomerate of soft materials that flake easily into even like a feeble democratic system that ‘distributes’ static individuals. Her use of ‘diameter’ is also interesting here, for it denotes a line passing through something, dividing and splitting it. So, perhaps then, like the feeble conglomerate that shale is, democracy actually works to create divisive and contingent ties between individuals.

Also, it might be worth noting that shale is also a verb, and denotes the removal of a shell or husk from things such as fruits and nuts. I think this might work nicely in terms of Mouré’s posturing of democracy as a sort of prosthetic veneer of individuality, something that is supposed to ‘protect’ the inner core yet also renders it immobile.”

³⁷ This “A” is made substantially smaller in the later BookThug edition, which is probably not designed to suppress this intervention but rather to adapt to the smaller pages and margins of this later edition.

³⁸ Existing movements are characterized as weakened or ineffectual, as in the line “Why are the resistances of bread suffering?” (34). The line, for me, immediately recalls Kropotkin’s *The Conquest of Bread* and its insistence on engaged collective revolution, a text that encourages revolution (albeit a nonreactionary one).

the text ultimately encourages revolution of the mind and of the subject, writing first: “The book of ambition must wait: the chins of police / work to absorb mind” (32); and later, “Her identity drifted. / I am the voyage’s resistance; to burn is reducing this” (90). These examples suggest a radical postanarchist politics lurking just beneath the surface of these computer-generated lines. It is a postanarchism

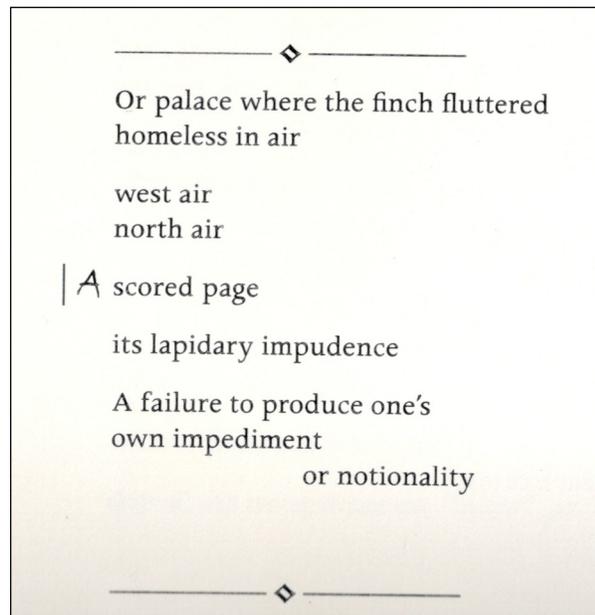


Figure 20
Erin Mouré. *Pillage Laud* (100).

relegated to the margins of signification, made available through the ways in which the borderline nonsensical nature of the text’s meaning encourages the engagement of the reader on a level quite unlike the typical reading process.

In this sense, Mouré’s anarchism is not unlike the anarchism suggested by the other authors of my project, especially the ones who explicitly self-identify as anarchist like Cage, Mac Low, and Duncan. Like Mac Low’s anarchism, it is non-utopian and its radical potentials lie in its construction of “meaning” at the margins of signification. Like Cage’s, it is interested in posing questions or problems and allowing the reader the freedom to interpret and respond to those questions as he or she sees fit. Like Duncan, it is interested in viewing composition as a field in which with authorial persona is free to forge connections and to borrow from various voices. Howe’s anarchism is similarly anti-authority, and it is also interested in refusing the dominance of larger structures, but in this way it is probably more like the implicit (post)anarchism of Spahr, Mullen, and Levertov. Like Levertov, she is interested in building and

addressing a larger community. Like Mullen, she is interested in appropriating voices and reinserting herself into texts that would otherwise be oppressive. Like Spahr, she refuses to self-identify and instead speaks a testimony of the personal and the revisionist-historical. I do not mean to suggest here two schools of postanarchism that stand in contrast to each other. Indeed, I hope to have demonstrated throughout these chapters that all of these anarchist tactics are interconnected and rely on each other for their efficacy. I merely mean at this end to bring all of these divergent tactics together, and to propose after all a postanarchism that is just as multiple as this project.

Conclusion

I start this conclusion in a way that is probably ill-advised and controversial: that my project has failed. I don't mean to suggest that it hasn't been a worthwhile endeavour, or an important learning experience, or even that I did not, in the process, produce some valuable and enjoyable scholarship. But rather, that my goals that I laid out in my introductory plateaus about the revolutionary potentials of the blog form were naïve and idealistic at best; they did not account for the fact that digital scholarship that embraces a collaborative atmosphere and is thus enriched by the plethora of voices made available in the digital common is a vastly different enterprise than the protomonograph (or doctoral thesis). Perhaps this means that, as digital scholarship gradually encroaches on the traditional realm of print-based media in the humanities, we need to rethink the protomonograph altogether. When I presented a pecha kucha¹ presentation on my project for a panel concerned with rethinking the protomonograph at this past Modern Languages Association Annual Conference in Chicago, the response from the crowd was resoundingly that we can no longer justify the mode of the traditional print protomonograph or the resultant scholarship. It remains an archaic and unhelpful practice, and it is my hope that my own work and the (entirely anticipated) stir that has resulted from it can help to change doctoral requirements and open up space for new and exciting digital, creative, and collaborative work in literary studies and the humanities at large. But, the conclusion of a doctoral thesis is probably no place for such a diatribe; the work of doctoral reform and of humanities academic publishing more generally, has its roots and its efficacy elsewhere. I recommend Kathleen Fitzpatrick's *Planned Obsolescence*, which argues optimistically for a commons of academic humanities

¹ From the originating organization's website (pechakucha.org/faq): "a simple presentation format where you show 20 images, each for 20 seconds. The images advance automatically and you talk along to the images."

publishing that embraces the rhizomatic networking and the potential for more direct communal engagement made available through digital potentialities.

But, I should return to my first claim—that this project has failed—because I am sure it merits clarification. As I bring this project to a close, what I am forced to confront is how very little discussion it has produced, and the fault of this lies primarily with myself. I see now that I was writing for too many audiences. To begin, I was always writing first and foremost for my supervisor and my committee, all three of whom welcomed the digital form of this project but who were always primarily concerned (and rightly so) with the research and scholarship produced therein. I was writing to the administration in my department who were resistant to the digital form of the project. I was writing to my peers who were excited by the prospect and the potentials of this project's collaborative elements, and some of whom participated actively and enriched my project in ways that they could never know.² I also tried to write to a general public; but as the confused responses I got from non-academic friends and family can attest, I did not manage to reach this audience as I had hoped. All in all, the public and digital form of this scholarship required a tone of address that I could not and did not find, and largely for that reason the discussion on these posts tended to involve solely my supervisor, Andy Weaver, and myself. That said, the form of this project did radically reposition the relationship between myself and my supervisor, making it decidedly more colloquial and putting him decidedly more involved in my work—perhaps to his chagrin.

² And here I would like to add a special thank you to the members of my dissertation writing workshop who commented on the blog and privately, always reading no matter how crazy my ideas sounded. Mel, Jonathan, Thom, Sam, thank you for all your help! I'd also like to thank my colleagues and friends Kate, Matt, and Sean, for their comments, and especially for a coffee and liquor-fuelled discussions on the topic. Where would I be without you all?

But, discussion was also difficult to garner in this project because we typically understand scholarship in the humanities to be a solitary and highly individualized practice. As Lisa M. Spiro's blog post "Collaborative Authorship in the Humanities" on her digital scholarship blog, *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, demonstrates, while collaborative authorship in publications is relatively common in the digital humanities, it is quite rare in more traditional literary studies, despite the fact that panels such as the one I participated in have been touting its benefits for many years. In fact, the concept of collaboration and collaborative authorship has been discussed for at least fifteen years, as Cathy N. Davidson wrote an article, "What if Scholars in the Humanities Worked Together, in a Lab?" for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 1999, critiquing the notion of the solitary humanist as one grounded in a Romantic conception of authorship that is more or less universally disregarded as archaic in literary scholarship. Nonetheless, print-based scholarship in the humanities has tended to prioritize single-author publications, fashioning scholarship in the humanities as something that happens in private, a special, secret relationship between one scholar and a rather large pile of books. This is, of course, not the case; the core of research is that we use the ideas put forth by other scholars in order to improve our own work, and we as scholars in the humanities participate constantly in workshops, conferences, panels, peer-reviews, seminars, and the friendly exchange of ideas in order to better our scholarship. Regardless, print-based humanities scholarship is generally resistant to collaborative authorship in a way that the digital humanities,³ historically,

³ Comment by Andy Weaver (28/7/14): "have you explicitly defined what you specifically mean by 'digital,' 'digital humanities,' and (perhaps especially) 'digital scholarship'? I know these are terms that have been thoroughly discussed over the past 10+ years, but I can't recall if you've defined them somewhere in relation to your project. It's quite possible you have (my memory, poor at the best of times, is further addled today from lack of sleep due to driving around a baby at 1am, desperately hoping he would fall asleep); if you have, that's fine—but I wonder if that's a section you need either to add to your introduction or else highlight more explicitly, now that it seems more central to your project?"

is not. Part of this is because digital projects often require different individuals with different kinds of expertise (a coder, a graphic designer, a linguistic analyst, a literary scholar). But part of it is also because digital projects—often using the internet as a networking tool—embrace the potentials of the digital world to produce a common readership.

As Dave Parry notes in his essay, “The Digital Humanities or a Digital Humanism,” it is not that digital humanities invented or even reinvented collaborative scholarship, but rather that it makes accessible and visible the collaborative nature of the work that we already do. “Of course,” he writes, “collaborative and collective scholarship has a long history both inside and outside of the academy, especially in the sciences, where collaborative scholarship is the standard, not the exception” (np). Instead, for Parry, digital humanities confronts the relatively new idea historically that scholarship in the humanities is what he terms “an individual, indeed often solitary, performance” (np). In the end, Parry argues that while “[d]igital humanities did not invent collaborative scholarship,” it ultimately “make[s] such work more acceptable and transparent” (np). My goal with this project was to carry on this task; in some ways my project is a digital humanities one, and in others—the fact that I work primarily with print-based media and I will defend this as a print-based dissertation—it is not. What I am primarily concerned with in welcoming other voices into this project is that my work be entered into a discourse with other scholars, ultimately producing better and more nuanced scholarship on both sides. While in some situations this work has successfully engaged other voices in its discursive practice, in other situations this has not been the case. What I learned from this project is that it is both idealistic and naïve to look only to the radical new potentials of digital scholarship and digital humanities without looking also at what the form obsolesces, namely the need to treat voices—even dissenting voices—as valuable in and of themselves, something face-to-face contact and, to an

extent, print-based media, tends to encourage. That is, it is much easier to disregard or discredit the relatively temporal or ephemeral digital text than the print-based one.

What can we learn from digital poetics?

What I want to add to a postanarchist literary theory, then, is that it must embrace all work as containing the potentials and the limitations of a digital poetics. This is probably a very controversial argument, but one that has its roots in studies of digital poetry. As C.T. Funkhouser illustrates in his seminal work, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms, 1959-1995*, it is not only useful to understand that digital poetry has its roots in a history of the avant-garde; it is also useful to consider that all poetry—especially experimental poetry—written in the last half-century is necessarily influenced by the radical potentials and McLuhanian obsolescences of technology and the technologization of poetics. Digital poetry, Funkhouser argues, was “mechanically and conceptually built in the decades *before* personal computers” (1). With roots in Dada, Oulipo, Black Mountain poetics and projective verse, concrete poetry, imagism, the French avant-garde, Futurism, and high modernism, digital poetry (and its many off-shoots like cyberpoetics, kinetic poetry, hypertext fiction, and so on) cannot be understood as separate from the print-based tradition. We must also consider the manner with which writing *anything* in the last fifty years or so is necessarily influenced by the technologization of this practice from the typewriter to the personal computer to the current ubiquity of internet network accessibility. In this way, the tendency in scholarship of digital poetics to look back on these precursors and influences should also work both ways; it would be incomplete to study the texts in my project without also considering them a part of the network of digital poetics. Throughout this project my eye has always been on the material and technological conditions of the production of these poems, which is often (see Mac Low or Mouré) digital in nature. But, I

would like to make explicit here the need for a postanarchist literary theory to pay particular attention to the digital and networked elements of all poetry, *especially* print-based (read: not born-digital) poetry.

To begin, digital poetics explicitly works towards a depersonalization of poetry and a de-individualization of the author by virtue of their networked nature and the often randomized elements of their production as well as their tendency towards active engagement of their readership. As Funkhouser notes, “[d]igital poems are more inclined toward abstraction and are largely depersonalized, especially as the media used in composition has become hybridized” (17). My project saw this tendency in action in the works of Cage, Mac Low, and Mouré, but as my postanarchist readings of the other authors on my list can attest, print-based media also sees this concern enacted on the level of palimpsestic rewriting in Howe and Spahr, and intertext as in Duncan. While these effects are not exclusive to digital poems, the processes of

[r]andomization, patterning, and repetition of words, along with discursive leaps and quirky, unusual semantic connections, are almost always found in digital poetry, though sometimes these effects are so amplified that the poems would not be considered poetry by someone using traditional definitions. (Funkhouser 18)

Additionally, digital poems are marked by instability and flux. As Funkhouser goes on to describe, “[d]igital poems do not exist in a fixed state”⁴ and thus “[a]ny work that exists in digital form is temporary” (21). Indeed, “[l]ongevity is not one of the genre’s defining characteristics”

⁴ Comment by Andy Weaver (24/7/14): “Fascinating stuff. One question/request for clarification: you note that ‘Funkhouser goes on to describe, “[d]igital poems do not exist in a fixed state”’; how literally does Funkhouser intend us to take this comment? I haven’t read his work, so I’m curious—because you seem to take the comment rather figuratively, implying that a page-based poem, through its allusions and such, does not maintain a single, universal meaning. So, are you extending/adapting Funkhouser’s point to include rhizomatic print texts, or does he already intend that point?”

Response (28/7/14): “In this particular case, Funkhouser is referring to the literal unfixed state of digital/kinetic poetry, but throughout the text he does use this unfixed’ nature of digital poetry to support politicized readings.”

(ibid). While recent curatorial work by the acclaimed digital humanist and creative writer Dene Grigar has endeavoured to change the way we view the ephemerality of the digital text, it stands to reason that this very ephemerality is a hallmark of the digital text. In some ways, the fleeting nature of the meaning inherent in the print-based media this project studies reflects the temporariness of the digital poem.

Perhaps the most important feature of digital poetry from a postanarchist perspective is that it is marked by linking, both through hypertext and through a radical intertextuality that both directs to other texts (either digital or print-based) and conditions itself to generate new poems and/or proliferate itself. As my introduction indicated, hypertext and hyperlinking are a major feature of the form of this project and of a postanarchism in general in that they embrace a rhizomatic structure that opens up the potentials of a reader freedom not typically afforded by the gestures toward linearity inherent in the bound book. For Funkhouser (and this position is affirmed by the scholarship of many other digital humanities studying electronic literature, namely Florian Cramer, Brian Kim Stefans, Sandy Baldwin, etc.), digital poetry is marked by this rhizomatic linking. “Digital poetry is not a fixed object,” he explains, and “its circuitry perpetuates a conversation” (18). Embracing the conversation and discursivity inherent in the common and outlined in my introduction, digital poetry makes apparent the fact that “[p]oetry is a social constructed art form, always situated within other texts (not limited only to poems) and extended by readers” (ibid). The poetry studied here embraces this fact, as demonstrated by the writing-through methods of Cage and Mac Low (and also of Howe and Mullen), the reading-writing of Duncan, the active engagement of the reader of Levertov and Spahr, and the borrowed computer-generated language of Mouré. What all of this is meant to suggest is that a

postanarchist literary theory has a lot to learn from digital poetics, and the relative failures of this project in blog form is a testament to this.

Postanarchism and the Digital

Does this mean that a postanarchist literary theory is best suited to study digital poetics? I am hesitant to go this far. But, what it does mean is that postanarchism is a political and literary theory bound to its sociohistorical context, and in this way it must embrace the digital in a way that Hakim Bey could never have envisioned when he coined the term decades ago. Embracing the digital elements of *digital* humanities, a postanarchist literary theory uses the radical potentials of the digital in order to break open the distinction between it and the classical or traditional anarchists that the term was originally meant to usurp. Just as Saint Schmidt argues in his essay, “Postanarchism is not what you think it is: The Role of Postanarchist Theory After the Backlash,” such a distinction is not only unhelpful, but it runs counter to the postanarchist desire to replace epistemological and ontological binarisms with openness and commonality. He writes,

I ... do not believe that it is desirable or even possible to pigeonhole unique individuals into two distinctly labelled boxes, namely ‘classical anarchist’ or ‘traditionalist’ and ‘postanarchist’... [T]he postanarchist attitude is characterized by the endless interrogation of the reality of these very boxes. (np)

If, as Schmidt argues, postanarchism is predicated on “the assumption that power is a pervasive, multinodal, phenomenon which is both creative and destructive in its operation” (np), as I tend to agree, then the digital offers postanarchism a way to address and appropriate power in a way that works against its potentially destructive capacities and towards its more creative ones.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that digital humanities and digital poetics are inherently postanarchist, or even inherently political. As Matthew K. Gold points out in “The

Digital Humanities Moment,” the introduction to the highly influential *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, “fault lines have emerged within the DH community between those who use new digital tools to aid in relatively traditional scholarly projects and those who believe that DH is most powerful as a disruptive political force that has the potential to reshape fundamental aspects of academic practice” (np). While it is clear from the form and the politics behind my project that I side with this latter group, I have no interest in designating my work as effective digital humanities in a way that other projects that appear to be much more traditional are not. Instead, I would like to argue first that *any* digital intervention into humanities scholarship—a historically and culturally print-dominated medium—has the potential to be disruptive, but it need not be. But, more importantly for my project, I would also like to argue somewhat controversially that all postanarchist projects *must* in some form or another pay attention to the potentials of the digitally networked world to create many and multiple temporary autonomous zones and to connect disparate and unique individuals into a common in which all voices can be accessed. This is not to suggest that the internet is an anarchist utopia where all humans are created and treated equally (such a statement would be so egregiously false that the internet itself would stand up to oppose it), but rather that postanarchism must insist on creating moments of digital scholarship in which moments of radical freedom and relative autonomy can erupt more easily and more accessibly thanks to the connective potentials of the digital.

Moving Forward and Looking Back; or, How to Print the Internet

I would like to spend a few moments, then, critically reflecting on the transition from the open forum of the digital project to the more closed form of this final print-based project. I do this for two main reasons: first, because I want this project to be as transparent as possible to underscore the importance of process in research; second, because I hope that my work can serve

as the basis for more procedurally-conscious digital-print-hybrid projects. In its blog form, this project was difficult to contain and thus difficult to defend (both literally at a dissertation defense, and figuratively as a whole argument or text). My goal has been, in editing for print, to produce a project feasibly organized in the general form of the traditional print-based thesis, but one that leaves in it elements of the process that was so integral to its production, and that remains the most important part of it both formally and politically. The vestiges of the project's blog form reappear in the print thesis in the following four ways: fragmented chapters, user-generated comments, user-suggested revisions, and authorial responses.

Fragmented Chapters

While it would not be possible to revise and print each plateau individually (that would make a project of unmanageable length and almost impossible readability), I did want the final form of this project to retain some of the fragmentary nature of the initial posts. I have worked to retain the fragmentary nature of blogging by organizing the chapters thematically, creating relatively short chapters of two authors. The posts are not recreated chronologically, but are rather organized topically, connecting two authors together where the single-author focus of the blog did not. Ten-page sections, each dealing with both authors, are separated by subheadings that unite both authors but also embrace the multiple voices and viewpoints inherent in this project. This also serves to recreate the connective elements of hyperlinking which cannot be reproduced on the page. While all terminology denoting the blog form has been edited out for the final product (for example, all use of the term "plateau," and all references to "this" or "last week's post"), the organization of each chapter contains within it the remnants of the procedures through which it was born.

User-Generated Comments

Most of the comments posted to this site by readers are included in this project by way of footnotes. Typically, these have been edited so that evaluative comments or jokes are removed (but retained in my heart), and repetitive comments are similarly edited. Despite this, the addition of comments to footnotes has resulted in numerous notes that often overwhelm the initial reading of my work. This overwhelming works to my project's advantage by foregrounding the multiple voices that went into its production. When a comment is added to my final work in a footnote, the full name of the reader (where available) is included, as well as the date and time of the initial comment.

User-Suggested Revisions

Where reader comments have provoked me to make a substantive revision in my work, I typically do so without signalling it in the paragraph proper. Once the revisions are made, I have added a footnote providing the original comment as a signpost that a major revision has occurred and as a citation to the reader who originally suggested this revision. This element of my project is one I am particularly fond of because it lets the process (and the multiple authors involved) be made manifest, and it does not allow me to take the credit for work that has been made stronger by the input of other readers. It also marks the final version of this project as distinct from the draft-like status of the original blog posts.

Authorial Responses

Finally, my own responses to comments are also included in the footnotes, at times resulting in a back-and-forth conversation that can span up to five comments per note. While these responses appear throughout my project, they are most frequently found in dialogue between my supervisor, Andy Weaver, and myself. These personal responses serve not only to allow for tangential notes littered throughout my project, but they also signal the degree to which

the reader-generated comments are tempered by and ultimately edited by my own authorial voice which cannot help but loom over this project. I am particularly interested, too, in the ways that my own voice in the comments section foregrounds the fact that the comments are dialogues rather than editorial instructions. In terms of my discussions with my supervisor especially, they demonstrate the ways in which the digital form of my project has shaped and altered the ways that I engage with my supervisor, and the ways that he is able to organize, affect, and provoke my scholarship.

In the end, while this final print-based project differs dramatically from the initial digital one, it still embraces the potentials of connection, commonality, and multivalence that form the core of my project at large. While I may have initially been hesitant to produce a print-based version of this work, I now appreciate organizing and combining all of these disparate materials into one project that refuses the complete cohesion traditionally expected from the doctoral thesis. I admire its hybrid nature and its refusal to let the work, the frustration, the difficulty, the errors, and the joys of the writing process remain implied at best, or more typically invisible. The transition from digital to print signals, too, the postanarchist interest in dissolving binaries; I may print this project out in the end,⁵ but it will always already (or always also) be a digital project. Above all, what it really does is open up the potentials for open, collaborative scholarship that never pretends to be anything but.

⁵ Comment by Andy Weaver (28/7/14): “The blog will remain viable online, won’t it? If so, that theoretically keeps open the comments stream? So that conversation could, theoretically, continue? You might want to note that. Also, the print diss will acknowledge and directly point to the blog in the intro, right? That’s also worth pointing out, since it hints at possibly a synergistic relationship between print and digital forms.”

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